

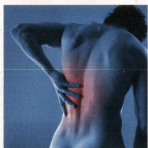
THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

choice



Green fuels

We assess their impact from production through to exhaust pipe with surprising results



Back pain

Pills, therapy, surgery
- CHOICE members tell us what works for them

Lab tests

Espresso machines
Smartphones
Condenser dryers
Digital cameras
Set-top boxes
Slow cookers
Steam mops

MARCH 2011 • WWW.CHOICE.COM.AU

★ Appliance reliability ★

How do yours stack up?

★ Solar panel update ★

Get the best deal

★ Sweet treats ★

Can be good for you too!

148
PRODUCTS
RATED!

And the winner is...
LANDLINE
VS MOBILE
How do they shape up?

Retirement villages ★ Tricks and traps to watch out for

COMMENT

In with the new ...

From Best Online Retailer to Best TV Brand, the CHOICE Awards cover the very best products and services in Australia



We welcome a new face to CHOICE this month. Mary Gillespie (pictured here with me) is the magazine's new editor, and we're delighted to have her on board.

Mary knows all about successful publishing ventures. Before joining CHOICE, she was deputy editor of Australia's third-largest weekly magazine, *that's life!*. Like CHOICE, *that's life!* has a highly engaged readership, and Mary is looking forward to getting to know you and hearing your thoughts on how you'd like your magazine to develop and improve. Read more about Mary on our new Members Noticeboard on page 12. This is your page, so let us know what you want to see featured there.

... And out with the old?

Our cover story this month (page 28) asks whether the landline phone is dead. Because old habits die hard, I insisted on installing one in our current home when

we first moved to Australia, only to find we hardly ever use it. I was keen to keep in touch with family and friends back in the UK, but in reality, we now use Skype for long-distance calls while our landline phone sits in its cradle, gathering dust. Our story reveals the pros and cons of losing your landline, and as you'll discover, despite a decrease in usage, there may still be life in the old dog yet.

Join us at the CHOICE Awards

Finally, we're holding our second annual CHOICE Awards ceremony on 31 March, and next month's issue will be dedicated to them. From Best Online Retailer to Best TV Brand, you'll get the lowdown on the very best products and services in Australia and why they have won a coveted CHOICE gong. The Best Retailer will also be revealed, as voted for by you, our members.

If you can't wait until April, you can also join us at the ceremony itself, which will be held in the evening at the Australian Museum in Sydney. We're offering our members a reduced price of \$125 per ticket, which includes a three-course dinner plus entertainment as hosted by our MC, Adam Spencer. So, if you fancy rubbing shoulders with the biggest consumer names in Australia, turn to page 12 for more details and the chance to win a trip for you and a friend to Sydney to attend the event. But hurry, as tickets will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Nick Stace, CEO
Phone 1800 266 786

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for all the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry.

We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, www.choice.com.au and from other services we supply to benefit members and consumers.

CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

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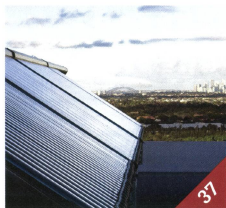
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New legislation has created basic consumer guarantees to ensure you receive what you pay for



+ TRAVEL

BACK FOR THE LONG HAUL Qantas A380s are back at full thrust after a mid-air incident last November, when an A380 was forced to make an emergency landing in Singapore after its Rolls-Royce (R-R) Trent 972 engine exploded over Indonesia. According to a Qantas spokesperson, "all A380s are back in service except the aircraft involved in the November incident, which remains in Singapore". After the incident, a number of safety actions, including additional engine checks, were recommended by aviation authorities.

Singapore Airlines, which also uses the R-R Trent 972 engines, briefly grounded their fleet while checks were carried out, but Lufthansa's R-R Trent-powered A380s stayed in the sky. Rolls-Royce claims the Trent 900 series are "the engine of choice" for two-thirds of A380 operators.

A380 sales continue to increase. Asiana Airlines has recently ordered six, although engine selection is yet to occur.

HANNAH GREW

+ PETS

Pet food or junk food?

More people are choosing rabbits and guinea pigs as pets, but most feeds are the equivalent of fast food.

In the wild, rabbits and guinea pigs thrive on grasses and hays high in fibre and low in calories, protein and calcium, a diet endorsed by the RSPCA and exotic-animal veterinarians. But most of the commercially available pellets and mixes do not meet these dietary recommendations.

The RSPCA stopped endorsing prepared foods in August 2010 and now only recommends high-quality pellets as part of a balanced diet.

"There's been an explosion of evidence on what is appropriate to feed a pet rabbit or guinea pig," says RSPCA vet Dr Jade Norris. "Pellets should be high in fibre and form only a small part of any small animal's overall diet."

"Eighty per cent of the problems I see are diet related," says Dr David Vella, Australia's only Diplomat of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners in Exotic Companion

Mammals. Dr Vella recommends Oxbow pellets as part of a balanced diet, but argues that "mixes are especially inappropriate, because rabbits and guinea pigs pick out the sweetest, saltiest, fattiest stuff – they love it like children love hamburgers and chips. The only good mix would be one that identifies itself as a treat, to be fed a maximum of one tablespoon per day."

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH



+ BREAKING NEWS

Air-con alert

Fire investigators have said that several homes razed in the Perth bushfires on 6 February were destroyed by fire in rooftop evaporative air-conditioning units. "If this type of air conditioner is on the system will draw smoke and embers into the unit, starting a fire," a Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) spokesperson said. They identified the problem about 12 years ago and have been working to improve safety. FESA advises that during bushfires, evaporative air conditioners should be switched off and filters kept damp.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

Simply cheaper

A new SIM card option has arrived on the Australian market with the promise of local calling rates when in the UK or US. Similar to the Amaysim model (see page 9), the Tru SIM works with any unlocked mobile phone. UK rates are 25c per minute, compared with the standard Australian roaming rate of \$1.09 per minute, Tru says. In the US, it's 5c versus \$2.19 a minute.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

A fairer Mars Bar

Mars, the world's largest manufacturer of chocolate, has announced that from June 2011 it will use only Rainforest Alliance Certified cocoa in bars manufactured in Australia. The move is part of a wider campaign to switch the company's entire chocolate supply to sustainable sources by 2020.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

+ SUSTAINABILITY

Green schemes washed away

A swathe of green initiatives are on the chopping block to fund recovery efforts for the Queensland floods.

When Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the federal government's response to the recent Queensland flood disaster, more than half of the \$2.8 billion identified in spending cuts and deferrals came from climate change programs.

Four green schemes were canned and another four cut back, including the Carbon Capture and Storage Flagships program. The Cleaner Car Rebate Scheme, commonly known as "cash for clunkers", was cancelled before it even began. This is bad news for almost 200,000 consumers who could have looked forward to \$2000 rebates for replacing their pre-1995 models with new, fuel-efficient cars.

In some cases, the impact is less dramatic than the headlines suggest. The Green Start scheme, for example, which was to provide energy efficiency assistance for low-income households, was actually cancelled last December, while the Solar Home and Communities Plan, which provided \$8000 rebates for

solar photovoltaic (PV) systems, was closed to new applications back in mid-2009. Even the \$160 million cut from the Solar Hot Water Rebate, which provides up to \$1000 for eligible households to install solar units, is based on capping the program based on current demand. Whether demand stays at those levels is another issue.

Justifying these cuts, the Prime Minister repeated the government's commitment to introducing a carbon price as the lowest-cost way to reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. CHOICE will be on the case when the government responds to its own review into energy efficiency later this year, campaigning to make it easy and equitable for consumers to reduce their bills and go green.

MATT LEVEY

To find out how the floods have affected produce prices, turn to our Banana Blow-out story on page 7.



+ CONSUMER LAW

Guaranteed satisfaction

Consumers now enjoy stronger protection.

Newly enacted legislation has created basic guarantees to ensure you receive what you pay for. If you have a problem and a guarantee is not met, you may be entitled to a remedy. The time period is not fixed, but common sense will prevail.

The remedy you receive will depend on whether the issue is major or minor. If minor, the supplier must remedy the problem within a reasonable time; this may involve replacing the item or offering a refund. In this case, you can't choose the remedy.

A major failure is one where the problem is so serious you wouldn't have bought the item if you'd known about it. It may be unsafe, significantly different from the description or unfit for its purpose (and cannot be repaired within a reasonable time). In this case you may choose a refund, replacement or compensation for the item's drop in value.

If an item cannot be returned without a significant cost, the supplier must collect the goods at their expense and within a reasonable time. The original packaging is not required.

Any manufacturer's warranty is additional to your rights under consumer guarantees. So if you're thinking of buying an extended warranty, look carefully at what it covers. Keep an eye out for more details on consumer guarantees in an upcoming issue of CHOICE.

KATRINA LEE

IT'S OUR BIRTHDAY!

March is a big month for CHOICE. We're celebrating our 51st birthday and World Consumer Rights Day. Keep your eye on www.choice.com.au for special events marking these occasions.

IN BRIEF

COOL TECHNOLOGY

A new air-conditioning process that uses 50%-90% less energy than traditional air conditioners has been patented by the United States Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). Instead of refrigerating air, the system uses membranes and evaporative cooling with liquid desiccants to remove heat. The system is not commercially available yet, but NREL plans to license the technology to industry.

SOLAR SCHEME DIMMED

In October 2010, the NSW government modified its Solar Bonus Scheme to have an overall capacity limit of 300 megawatts for all connected generators. Applications to join the scheme have now surpassed that limit, and should all applicants proceed with connecting to the grid, the Minister for Energy may close the scheme. New generators can still be connected once the cap is reached, but may not be eligible to receive feed-in tariffs (FITs). Turn to page 37 for more on other changes to FITs.



The panel's endorsement of a nutritional traffic light labelling system is CHOICE's biggest triumph, and should be made mandatory to be most effective

+ FOOD LABELLING

Clearer labels on the menu

CHOICE's campaign for clearer food labels has achieved some wins – but there's still some distance to go.

A review of food labelling laws by an independent panel has endorsed our recommendations to give consumers better information on food products. But they could still be in the dark on sustainable and ethical choices.

Our biggest wins

Consumer health first in line

The panel made a number of recommendations that make health and safety top priority, and strengthen the role of food labels in encouraging healthy choices.

Green light for traffic

light labels The panel's endorsement of a traffic light labelling system is CHOICE's biggest triumph. Our own research shows front-of-pack traffic light labelling helps consumers make better choices easily, when compared with the food industry's complicated Percent Daily Intake scheme. To be most effective, the traffic light scheme should be mandatory. However, the panel's recommendation that it be voluntary is an important step.

No more dubious nutrition or health claims on unhealthy foods The panel recommended that any product that makes a claim about nutrient content or health benefit pass special criteria. This puts an end to sugary, fibre-flimsy breakfast cereals claiming to be a "good source of [added] vitamins and minerals".

Clearer country-of-origin

(COO) labels The panel agreed that COO labelling is a source of frustration and confusion, especially when companies give the impression that a food is more Australian than it really is. They suggested the ACCC take responsibility, recommending clearer labelling of Australian ingredients.

Palm oil uncovered Sources of added sugars and fats to be listed, forcing manufacturers to fess up when they've used unhealthy options.

Nanotechnology named

Manufacturers would have to disclose when products are derived from nanotechnology.

Other improvements include the fibre on nutrition panels,

warning labels for alcoholic beverages, and better information at food outlets.

Room for improvement

Many genetically modified (GM) foods will remain unlabelled

The panel recommended existing laws be extended to fast food menus and GM-derived flavours.

Industry to self-regulate

Increasing demand for ethically and sustainably produced foods has led to claims that don't always meet consumer expectations. The panel did suggest that the government consider making the new organic and biodynamic Australian Standard mandatory, and developing a voluntary standard for free-range products – but was hardly met with resounding support.

Next steps

The government has until December 2011 to decide which recommendations it will act on, but we believe it should move without delay.

CLARE HUGHES

+ HEALTH

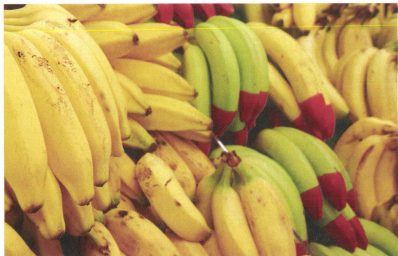
If smoking persists, see your doctor

Subsidised nicotine patches are now available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), the federal government has announced. Costing about \$100 for a 12-week course, or less than \$20 if you're a concession holder (instead of hundreds of dollars without the subsidy), affordability is no longer an issue for those who really want to quit.

Like other forms of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), such as gum and lozenges, patches reduce the nicotine withdrawal symptoms associated with stopping smoking, and increase the likelihood of quitting successfully. Counselling in conjunction with NRT further increases success rates, and smokers are encouraged to talk to their doctor and use support services such as Quitline.

Only full-strength nicotine patches (15mg/16 hours or 21mg/24 hours) are subsidised, and you'll need a prescription from your doctor. They're still available over the counter at full price from pharmacies and supermarkets, as are lower-dose patches.

The initiative is expected to cost the government \$50 million per year, an amount it says it's well placed to supply from tobacco taxes and excise revenue, which exceeds \$6 billion per year. It's also much less than the government's health costs and revenue losses related to smoking, which amount to about \$3 billion per year. **KARINA BRAY**



+ BANANA BLOW-OUT

The cost of eating healthily is likely to keep rising in the coming months, as Queensland's double disaster continues to hit consumers where it hurts.

Michael Creed, an agribusiness economist with NAB, says flood damage to fruits and vegetables including rockmelons, mangoes, salad vegetables, citrus and sweet potatoes "is expected to exert significant pressure on food prices". But bananas appear to be headed for a full scale price explosion thanks to Cyclone Yasi.

In 2006, Cyclone Larry was responsible for a massive premium on what the banana industry says is Australia's most popular fruit, which went from about \$2.50 to \$15 a kilo and was as high as \$12 six months later. Yasi may have dealt a heavier blow. Australian Banana Grower's Council Chairman, Cameron MacKay, says about 75% of the Australian banana industry has been affected, "so this is a fairly significant disaster for our industry". Commonwealth Bank Chief Economist Michael Blythe says the price spike would likely be as bad as after Larry "at the very least". Yasi also took a toll on sugarcane crops and sent sugar prices to a 30-year high early last month.

On the financial front, the floods

have brought about some relief for borrowers. The Reserve Bank of Australia ruled at its February meeting that the cash rate (on which banks ostensibly base mortgage rates) would stay at 4.75%. "In setting monetary policy the bank will, as on past occasions where natural disasters have occurred, look through the estimated effects of these short-term events on activity and prices," said RBA Governor, Glenn Stevens.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

**CHOICE
ONLINE**

In February, CHOICE met with Catherine King, the Parliamentary Secretary responsible for food regulation, to outline our priorities for action. To find out more, go to www.choice.com.au/foodlabellingreview

CAN YOU HELP?

Renovation tips and nightmares

We're investigating things that can go wrong when you're building or renovating your home. If you've been taken for a ride by a builder, plumber or other tradesperson, or if you have any tips on finding a good tradie or contractor, we'd love to hear from you. Please email us at builders@choice.com.au.



+ MILK FROTHER

Serve it up!

These coffee gadgets still don't live up to the hype – or their price tags.

Sunbeam claims that at the touch of a button, the Café Creamy will heat and froth milk to create the perfect cafe latte or cappuccino. Here at CHOICE, however, we're not really convinced.

The Café Creamy resembles a small, cordless electric kettle with a motor and heating element in the base as well as a removable jug with lid. Two attachments are supplied with the unit, one for mixing and the other for frothing milk. Three buttons allow you to create cold milk beverages, warm drinks and to froth milk. Just fill the jug to the required level (110mL minimum and 250mL maximum) and select one of the three options. The rest is done automatically, and the unit stops at the end of the operation.

We tested the Café Creamy for frothing hot and cold beverages and heating milk. When frothing a hot beverage, we found that

although the milk reaches the desired 65°C, the froth isn't what you'd expect for lattes or cappuccinos. Instead, it resembles what's called roadhouse froth, with hard peaks, that needs to be spooned instead of poured. For heating, we found it heats the milk and mixes the coffee well, despite only a thin layer of froth being formed.

The jug's non-stick surface is easy to clean, however it's difficult to remove and change the attachments. The frother attachment has thin prongs, so be careful as it can bend easily.

CHOICE VERDICT

The Café Creamy costs less than the Lattemento, which we reviewed in September 2010 CHOICE (page 9), but the quality of froth is the same. If you're making lattes or cappuccinos at home, chances

are you'll already own an espresso machine, and most new models now have in-built milk frothers. We still recommend the Sunbeam Café Espresso Stainless EM3800 (\$199 RRP), the Best Buy from our previous and current rounds of espresso machine testing (see page 42). For an extra \$120, you get the whole package – not only good froth, but a good cup of coffee as well.

REBECCA GATTO

SUNBEAM CAFÉ CREAMY AUTOMATIC MILK FROTHER EM0180

Price \$80

Contact www.sunbeam.com.au



+ STICK VACUUM CLEANER

Slick stick

Dyson's latest stick vac is a top performer, but has a price tag to match.

Stick vacuum cleaners are a fast-growing section of the market, and Dyson has entered the fray with the cordless DC35 Multi Floor (also known as the Digital Slim). The DC35 is essentially a variation of Dyson's handheld vacuums, with a detachable wand and power head. This gives it a different look to most other stick models, but it's designed for the same spot-cleaning jobs. It wasn't available in time for our recent test of stick

vacuums (see CHOICE, November 2010, page 60), but we've since put it through the same set of tests.

The DC35 is a good performer, scoring better overall than all the stick vacs in the November test. It's easy to use, though you have to hold down the trigger to keep it running, which can be tiring after a few minutes. Dirt pick-up from hard floors is good, as is cleaning edges and corners and the interior of a car. However, our tester noticed a few static electricity zaps while cleaning up flour. It's excellent at removing pet hair thanks to the power head, and dirt removal from carpet is significantly better than for any of the other tested stick vacuums – it's even better than some barrel models. That said, a good barrel or upright

vacuum is still your best option for a thorough carpet clean.

The DC35 has a lithium ion 22.2V battery, weighs 2.2kg and comes with crevice, upholstery, and dusting brush attachments. It runs for 16 minutes on its minimum power setting and eight-and-a-half minutes on maximum – more than adequate for most spot-cleaning tasks. As with other Dyson handhelds, it shuts off completely at the end of its running time rather than trailing off as the battery runs down.

CHOICE VERDICT

If you're after a good-quality stick vac and don't mind paying more, take a look at the Dyson DC35. CHRIS BARNES



DYSON DC35 MULTI FLOOR STICK VAC

Price \$469

Contact www.dyson.com.au



+ MOBILE PHONE SIM CARD

SIMple phone plan

Mobile users wanting to avoid long-term contracts now have a good-value option for casual use or as a second phone for the kids.

A new player in the SIM-only phone market helps simplify the confusing, multi-tiered pricing structure for calls, text and internet data access (turn to page 28 for more) – and at a very competitive rate.

Using a prepaid SIM card in your existing mobile phone can be a simple way to avoid long-term phone contracts. However, this can be expensive over time as phone companies often charge high call rates. This is where Amaysim is different. Unlike most other SIM-only phone cards, the Amaysim SIM has no flag fall (often called a connection fee) when making a call, and comes with a straightforward pricing structure for talk, text and internet access. Calling someone, whether it be on their landline or mobile, costs 15c per minute, rather than 15c per minute and 40c flag fall. Likewise, an SMS costs 12c per text, full stop.

You can purchase a SIM card online (see website below) or from stores such as 7-Eleven, Harvey Norman, Woolworths, Dick Smith, Coles Express, Franklins and Caltex service stations. Cards available

include a version for a standard phone as well as a smaller micro SIM used in some new phones such as the Apple iPhone 4.

Ordering or registering the SIM online is fairly uncomplicated. You can also use the site to move your existing mobile number over to Amaysim, make changes to your phone settings and top up the phone with \$15, \$30 or \$50 in credit. You have 90 days to use your credit, compared with other carriers where you need to use your credit within one or two months.

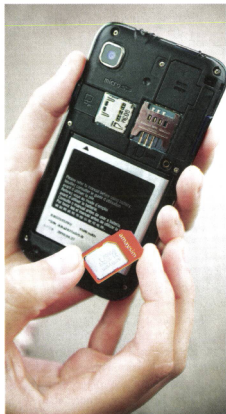
Internet access can be purchased in \$9.90 blocks for 1GB, or you can pay 5c per megabyte. Although better-value internet data plans are available from competitors, the pricing is in keeping with the clear and easy-to-understand costs Amaysim promotes.

Amaysim uses Optus' dual band network, so you can expect about 96% coverage within Australia if your phone supports 2100/900MHz. While coverage is not as widespread as Telstra's NextG network, especially in remote areas, it should be OK in major cities and towns. After testing the SIM for a month, we found overall performance for the network to be consistent with another phone using an Optus SIM.

CHOICE VERDICT

While the Amaysim SIM may not be a premium service, any new player in the market that helps keep the major networks competitive should be encouraged, and the plan was recently awarded number one mobile phone deal for low to medium users by PhoneChoice – www.phonechoice.com.au (not linked to CHOICE). Only time will tell if other phone networks choose to offer their own options for affordable talk-and-text pricing, without locking consumers into long-term contracts.

DENIS GALLAGHER



COMING UP

Keep an eye out for the second annual CHOICE Awards, featuring in the April issue, where we hand out bouquets to the brands and products that are leading the way in innovation and quality. Two awards are for the **Best Washing Machine** and **Best TV** brands, based on a combination of CHOICE testing and member feedback on reliability.

Digital radios are diversifying to include pocket models that cost significantly less than the table-top models we've previously tested. Smaller, more affordable players are now also available, but does cost-cutting also mean cuts to sound quality? We put five portable and 12 full-sized models through their paces.

We also turn the heat on eight **gas cooktops** and find a couple of Best Buy models that can save you hundreds.



AMAYSIM PREPAID OR POSTPAID SIM CARD

Price 15c per minute (standard calls)/
12c standard SMS/5c per MB for data
Contact www.amaysim.com.au



YOUR SAY

We want to hear from you. If your experience is not good, then you can help other CHOICE members avoid scams and rip-offs. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Forward planning

I'm an Optus Broadband customer, and for a few months now I've been thinking about changing my plan. So imagine my surprise when I found out that, on another Optus plan, I could get 10 times more download capacity at double the speed for two-thirds of what my current plan was costing me!

When I called Optus to change, I expressed my disappointment that they hadn't let me know about the better plan. Their response was that they have a lot of customers and can't contact everyone. They never seem to have any trouble getting in touch with their many customers whenever one is late settling their account!

THUMBS UP!

D Parkes of Ermington, NSW, thanks the staff at Bunnings in Auburn, NSW, for service that was "above and beyond". He bought a gardening tool that failed on its third use. He'd lost the receipt, but had a bank statement to prove the purchase, so staff reprinted his receipt and replaced the faulty product. "During the 30-minute process, staff remained helpful and friendly". Unfortunately, the replacement was a dud too, but Bunnings happily allowed an upgrade to a more robust unit without any fuss.

OfficeWorks' pricing policies get a thumbs up from **Shayne Burnet** of Carindale, Qld. He says that unlike other companies he's dealt with that sell both online and in-store, "OfficeWorks will always match or beat the prices of online or non-stocked items by 5%, so long as they can view the pricing".

Optus' behaviour here is at best unethical. If the current deal wasn't so good, and if it weren't such a hassle to change providers, I'd go elsewhere.

Mark Burton, Ringwood, Vic

CHOICE SAYS It's unfortunate that that the onus is on you to ensure you're on your provider's best plan. Optus told CHOICE they endeavour to contact all

their customers who are off or coming off contract to update them on new offers. But as Mark's experience shows, this doesn't always occur.

It's important to compare your plan with others towards the end of your contract to check it's still competitive. If it's not, but you're otherwise happy with your current provider, ask them for details about their best-value plans on offer.

EMAIL OF THE MONTH

Catch-22

Last October, my wife and I bought a Nokia 3720 mobile phone from TeleChoice. The phone was sold in a sealed box, but when we opened it at home that evening, we were shocked to find the phone's screen was cracked.

We returned with the phone to TeleChoice the next morning but they told us they wouldn't replace or pay to repair it, arguing that because it was in a sealed box when it was sold to us, it must have been OK. We pointed out this was a catch-22 situation, as we hadn't been invited to inspect the mobile in store to check it was of merchantable quality before we paid, but got nowhere. We wrote to Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV), who contacted TeleChoice on our behalf. Two months later – still with no mobile phone – CAV informed us that Nokia had approved a replacement mobile phone.

We're still perturbed by TeleChoice's unreasonable attitude and their claim that

they would not fix or replace a damaged phone in an unopened box.

Robin & Lesley Howells, Nunawading, Vic

CHOICE SAYS Well done for standing your ground and proactively seeking an alternative route to resolving your problem. TeleChoice told CHOICE that all handsets except prepaids can be opened in store to check they power up, charge and have no signs of physical damage. TeleChoice retailers are encouraged to offer these checks, but it's not mandatory. This process has been flagged for review.

If TeleChoice or any other mobile phone retailer does not offer to conduct these checks in store for you, ask to open the box and check yourself. If they refuse this, consider buying elsewhere.



How to
Clean
Practically
Anything

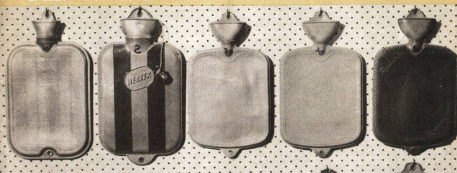


EMAIL OF THE MONTH Robin and Lesley receive *How to Clean Practically Anything*, or any other book of their choice at www.choice.com.au/books. Unfortunately we are unable to answer all the emails and letters we receive. We reserve the right to edit letters for length and clarity.

ONLINE THIS MONTH

There are two important dates in the March calendar – the second annual CHOICE Awards, which will be unveiled at a ceremony on 31 March, and our birthday. While it may not be the big 5-0 we celebrated last year, it's a good excuse to revisit the great stash of videos and vintage covers we pulled together to mark our half-century.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS HOT WATER BOTTLES DEEP FRYERS



Reliability survey

www.choice.com.au/reliability



Our ever-popular reliability survey has been updated with new categories (see page 14), so be sure to join our online community who've fleshed this out with their own recommendations and insights. If you're a CHOICE Plus member, you can view the full 22 product categories online.

Barbara Corser: I must have purchased four different Uniden cordless phone models in six years, and was not happy with any of them, so I finally gave up and bought a Panasonic. So much better!

Ray Durrell: I concur with the poor rating given to Fisher & Paykel dishwashers. We had a DishDrawer model, which along with numerous switch problems over the years

had issues with the pumps, which weren't adequately protected from things such as pips. If you're thinking of buying one, don't.

E.H. Hirsch: I bought my Westinghouse fridge/freezer BJ505SR in 2000, and three times over six years I've had to replace the thermostat.

Marika Connolly: We have a Westinghouse fridge and had problems within the first six months of purchase – either freezing up or not keeping food cold enough.

Bronwyn Morris: In the past I had a Whirlpool washing machine and dryer, both of which lasted about 30 years! I also had a Kelvinator fridge that lasted 36 years, with only one service call in that time. I'm sure my replacements won't last anywhere near as long.

Patrick Kiernan: I bought a Panasonic analog SD 42" plasma TV. Luckily, I took out an optional extended warranty. After a little more than three years, the plasma packed it in, and was replaced under warranty by a similar digital HD TV. (I took out another extended warranty again, just in case.)

I also bought an LG 32" LCD TV, which came with a three-year warranty. I wonder why other manufacturers can't offer the same.

CHOICE Awards

www.choice.com.au/choiceawards

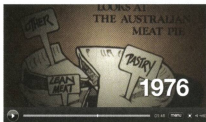
The inaugural CHOICE Awards were launched last year, recognising outstanding companies and products – a foil to our famous Shonkys, which puts dodgy operators in the limelight. Check out the categories for this year's CHOICE Awards, and read up on last year's winners and the background to the awards. We also have limited tickets available for the awards ceremony, to be held at the Australian Museum in Sydney on Thursday 31 March. Read all the details online.

CHOICE birthday special

CHOICE has a rich and colourful history, and we've captured the best moments of our 50-plus years online at www.choice.com.au/birthday

See our sequence of slideshows, showcasing CHOICE's wackiest covers over the decades. Even better, download the whole series as a screensaver – simply follow the prompts.

We've also put together five videos that capture highlights of the past five decades of CHOICE, including some of our more novel tests and exposés.



MEMBERS NOTICEBOARD

Welcome to the Members Noticeboard – this is your page! Here you'll find some handy and interesting information every month on what we're up to here at CHOICE, including sneak peeks of upcoming tests, updates on the battles our Campaigns team are fighting and events you may like to attend. We're always interested in hearing what you have to say and would like you to share your thoughts on what you'd like to see on this page for future issues. Please email us at member@choice.com.au and let us know what you think.

Q & A

New CHOICE Editor
Mary Gillespie

Why CHOICE?

Because CHOICE is an exciting, dynamic organisation that touches the lives of all Australians.

What do you love most about your job?

I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to work with the CHOICE team to help our members make the best choices as consumers.

How do you like to spend your spare time?

At the moment I'm renovating, so that takes up all my spare time. But I also love travel, eating out, swimming and riding my bike, catching up with friends and exploring food markets.

What is your favourite holiday destination?

I can't choose just one – I'd head off to Bangkok, New York or Paris at the drop of a hat.

What are you reading at the moment?

Mr Rosenblum's List by Natasha Solomons – a touching story about family and the desire to fit in.

How would you spend your last \$20?

Normally I'd say a tray of mangoes, but the Queensland floods have made that an impossibility. So, a couple of mangoes and a glass of sparkling would be perfect.

If you could invite five people to a dinner party, who would they be?

Barack Obama, Fidel Castro, Takashi Murakami, Katharine Graham and Nina Simone.

Finally, give us a few hints on what exciting things are in store for the magazine in 2011.

We'll be making your favourite magazine bigger and better with new sections, columns and features that we know you'll love.

We'd like to feature you in our Q&As. If you'd like to tell us a bit about yourself, email Rawya at member@choice.com.au and put Q&A in the subject line.



WIN a trip to the CHOICE Awards!

To celebrate our second Annual CHOICE Awards, one lucky member will win a trip for two to Sydney to attend the 2011 ceremony and dinner at the Australian Museum on 31 March. Just tell us in 25 words or less **how CHOICE has contributed to your life**. The prize includes flights for two to Sydney from the winner's nearest capital city, one night accommodation and transfers, and the winner will join our CEO, Nick Stace, as his guest for the ceremony. To enter, just send us your entry by email with CHOICE Awards in the subject line to member@choice.com.au by Friday 18 March. Visit www.choice.com.au/choiceawards for terms and conditions. Good luck!!

Sign up for CHOICE's e-newsletter

You can also receive updates about the CHOICE Awards straight to your inbox. If you don't already receive our monthly e-newsletter with regular updates on our top stories, tests and reviews, you can subscribe by visiting www.choice.com.au/newsletter.

Tell us what you think

If you, a member of your family or a friend use a mobility scooter, we'd love to hear from you. Tell us about your experiences using a mobility scooter and/or your concerns and opinions on safety, costs, reliability and usage rules. Send an email to consumerinsights@choice.com.au, have your say online at www.choice.com.au/scooter or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Get social.

Join us on Facebook and Twitter for fun competitions and updates on the products we're testing.





➤ BETTER BANKING

Simpler switching

Moving your account to another bank or institution remains a tall order for many unsatisfied customers.

Switching banks shouldn't be so difficult. A centrepiece of our proposed banking reforms [see CHOICE Online, below right] is to allow bank customers to keep their account numbers when switching in order to minimise disrupting their existing transaction arrangements, particularly direct deposit and direct debit set-ups. CHOICE has been pushing for this change for years and is urging government, banks and regulators to adopt it.

Your stories

Consumers often tell us that these sorts of hassles are the main obstacles to changing institutions. Responding to a recent CHOICE Online poll, one member admitted that "I have thought about it a couple of times because I know I'm not getting the best deal, but it's just more admin than I have time for". Another member, who made the switch from ANZ to a credit union, said the process "involved a trip to a branch and an annoying conversation with the teller", and that "changing direct credits and debits took time".

One CHOICE staffer whose Westpac term deposit had come to maturity at 5.8% was subjected to a particularly exhausting ordeal. Instead of rolling it over, the staffer found a 6.45% rate at the Bank of Queensland but wanted to give Westpac a chance to match it, not least because she knew changing institutions would be as much fun as a tax audit.

A series of phone calls to Westpac customer service got her nowhere, though she was told she might have better luck in store if she spoke to a manager. After reaching the front of a long queue on a Saturday, our staffer was told by a customer service rep: "That man over there might be able to help you." After another long wait, the man offered no help. "Every time I seemed to be getting close to resolving it I was directed to someone else."

Our staffer opted to have the term deposit funds transferred to Bank of Queensland electronically. Thirty-five dollars and few days later, the "instant" transfer was done. Temporarily defeated, she's keeping other accounts open at Westpac – for now. "I work all week and don't have the time to visit a branch again at the moment."

Another poll respondent, Angela, also found that closing her account was too difficult, but has come up with a solution. "I took most of my money and put it in an ING account and kept my crappy bank account to transfer funds when I need it. There you go – no fuss and no need to cancel anything." **ANDY KOLLMORGEN**

CHOICE BETTER BANKING REPORT RELEASED

CHOICE believes the legwork of changing accounts from one bank to another should be done by the institutions that have the details at their fingertips – not by busy consumers. The *CHOICE Better Banking Report*, released late last month, sets out our position on this and other financial issues, and coincides with new CHOICE campaign action.

The report's key recommendations include:

- Introducing portable account numbers
- Severing the link between pay and sales targets for bank staff
- Better ATM fee disclosure and no fees for balance inquiries
- Better disclosure and clearer information for all credit and banking products

CHOICE thinks the legwork of changing accounts should be done by the banks, not by busy consumers



In the first month of our Compare, Ditch and Switch campaign, launched in December last year, more than 50,000 consumers visited www.choice.com.au/betterbanking in search of a better deal.

NUTSHELL

>> More than 11,000 CHOICE members were polled to find the most and least reliable brands across 12 product categories.

>> Panasonic, winner of last year's inaugural CHOICE Heritage Award, comes out on or near the top for reliability across several products.

STORY MATTHEW STEEN

Branded loyalty

Which products and brands stand the test of time? CHOICE members tell all in our latest appliance reliability survey.

CHOICE testing uncovers the appliances and brands that perform well and are easy to use. But product and brand longevity is more difficult to test, given manufacturers frequently turn over or change products within a short space of time. By surveying our substantial member base about their long-term experiences with particular appliances and brands (see How We Survey, below), we can report on which brands will last the distance and provide trouble-free performance over the life of the product.

In our last appliance reliability survey (see CHOICE, May 2010, page 14), we reported on big-ticket items such as air conditioners and dishwashers. This time around, we looked at the following 12 product categories, which include smaller digital entertainment items:

- Washing machines
- Televisions
- Microwaves
- Portable media players
- Barbecues
- DVD players/recorders
- Dryers
- Cordless landline phones
- Lawnmowers
- Digital video recorders
- Set-top boxes
- Camcorders

HOW WE SURVEY

In November 2010, 11,635 CHOICE members completed our appliance reliability survey – thanks to everyone who took part. The survey identifies the most and least reliable brands, the major problems with appliances and which brands members are most and least likely to purchase again.

Products purchased from 2003 to 2010 were analysed for the types of problems users experienced, and multiple responses were allowed. We screen the data, so if your brand isn't listed here, it's because we didn't have a large enough sample size to report on [we still include this data in the Other listing].

STAY TUNED

We'll be revealing the best washing machine brand next month in our special awards issue of CHOICE.

WASHING MACHINES

Asko, Bosch, Electrolux, Fisher & Paykel, LG and Miele all made the What to Buy list in our last test of washing machines (see CHOICE, November 2010, page 62). This survey found **Miele** and **Bosch** to be the most reliable brands for washing your clothes, while Samsung, Ariston and, especially, Maytag are the least reliable. Of the Maytag owners, 13% said they had problems with machine balance and 9% with the program selector. Five percent of Samsung owners said they had a problem with the pump, and 5% had both belts and balance issues.

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Miele (956)	91
Bosch (857)	90
Westinghouse (222)	87
Simpson (466)	84
Kleenmaid (74)	83
Fisher & Paykel (1997)	83
LG (922)	82
Asko (352)	81
Other (344)	80
Electrolux (643)	79
Whirlpool (462)	76
Ariston (117)	74
Samsung (294)	71
Maytag (112)	63
All washing machines (7818)	83

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

Brand loyalty: 97% of Miele, 93% of Bosch and 91% of Asko owners would be happy to buy these brands again. For all other brands recommended in our last test, the likelihood of repurchase falls between 85% and 80%.

Washing machine problems: 14% of reported problems were with balance, 11% with circuitry, 8% with the pump and 8% with other leakage.



TELEVISIONS



TVs are generally reliable products, however for the less reliable brands listed here, the

main problem is picture quality. Our experts say

Panasonic, Sony and Samsung lead the pack for technical performance, and all these brands are also reliable. Sanyo and

Sharp TVs are generally poorer performers in our tests, however Sharp is a comparatively reliable brand.

Brand loyalty: 97% of Panasonic, 96% of Sony and 95% of Samsung owners said they would repurchase these brands. At the other end of the spectrum, 19% of NEC and 18% of Philips owners said they wouldn't buy that brand again, often due to poor performance.

TV problems: 41% of all problems relate to picture, followed by sound problems (14%) and tuner problems (10%).

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

(%)

Loewe (98)	97
Panasonic (2594)	96
Pioneer (207)	96
Toshiba (191)	95
Sharp (315)	94
Sony (2030)	93
LG (1170)	90
Samsung (1605)	90
NEC (128)	89
Sanyo (159)	89
Philips (262)	88
TEAC (87)	88
Other (1000)	88
All televisions (9846)	92

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

MICROWAVES

In our previous compact microwave test (*CHOICE*, February 2011, page 63), **LG, Panasonic, Samsung and Sharp** made our What to Buy list; these brands also perform well for reliability except Sharp.

Brand loyalty: 93% of Panasonic owners are likely to buy that brand of microwave again, followed by Sharp with 91%.

Microwave problems: 27% of respondents who had a problem said it related to the internal microwave light, followed by 17% for the display and 8% with the fan or turntable not working.



PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

(%)

Samsung (329)	92
Panasonic (2538)	91
LG (885)	91
Miele (160)	91
Sanyo (246)	90
Other (650)	88
Whirlpool (1115)	87
Sharp (1597)	87
Smeg (189)	80
All microwaves (6709)	89

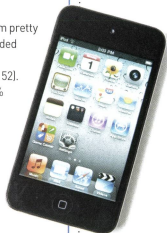
* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

PORTABLE MEDIA PLAYERS

Apple owners make up more than 75% of respondents for this category, and most seem pretty satisfied with their purchase. We recommended only Apple in our last test of media players (*CHOICE* December 2010/January 2011, page 52).

Brand loyalty: For repeat purchasing, 95% of Apple and 88% of Sony owners give their brands the thumbs up.

Media player problems: 37% of media player owners who had a problem in the past 12 months reported their players freezing constantly and needing to be reset, followed by 20% reporting batteries needing replacement.



PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

(%)

Sony (314)	93
Apple (4631)	90
Other (548)	90
iRiver (221)	89
Samsung (142)	89
SanDisk Sansa (123)	88
Creative Technologies (191)	83
All media players (6170)	90

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

BEFORE YOU BUY

- **Ask about the servicing arrangements.** If something goes wrong, will you have to bear the cost of transport to get it repaired?
- **Make sure the brand has parts or a service department available and/or easy to access in Australia** if you're buying a product that's manufactured overseas.
- **If you're buying a second-hand appliance, find out if the brand is still in business.** If you purchase a brand that's no longer in business, parts may be difficult to find should it break down.
- **If your appliance breaks down shortly after the written warranty expires, you may still be entitled to statutory warranty** (also known as implied warranty), including a possible refund, so it's worth chasing this up with the retailer.

BARBECUES

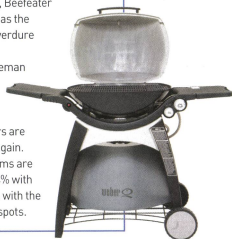
PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Weber (1191)	96
Beefmaster (626)	91
Coleman (69)	91
Other (1777)	91
Jackaroo (675)	90
Jumbuck (152)	90
Grill Master (107)	90
Cordon Bleu (188)	89
Outback (66)	89
Downunder (173)	87
Turbo (168)	87
Beefeater (292)	86
Everdure (202)	80
All barbecues (5686)	91

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

In our most recent test of barbecues (*CHOICE*, December 2010/January 2011, page 48), we recommended **Weber**, **Coleman**, **Beefeater** and **Everdure**. Weber stands out as the most reliable brand; however, Everdure is less reliable.

Brand loyalty: Weber and Coleman owners are most likely to buy these brands again at 95% and 94% respectively, while Downunder and Jumbuck owners are least likely to buy those brands again.

BBQ problems: 17% of problems are associated with parts rusting, 14% with the ignition not working and 10% with the food not cooking properly or hotspots.



DVD PLAYERS/RECORDERS

Eighty-four percent of our survey respondents own a DVD player/recorder. We're used to watching movies on this format, and the newer Blu-ray format is still some way from gaining the same sort of market share [see *CHOICE*, February 2011, page 42 for our review of Blu-ray players]. *CHOICE* has not tested basic DVD players for some time. When we sent out our reliability survey, your responses indicated that the market is saturated with brands; indeed, more than 80% of the brands [56 in total] you mentioned had too few responses, so we couldn't report on them.

Brand loyalty: Among the most reliable DVD player/recorder brands are **Pioneer** and **Panasonic**, with 94% of people who own these brands likely to buy them again. Sadly, however, Pioneer has withdrawn from the Australian market. 93% of **Sony** owners are likely to buy that brand again, as are 91% of **Yamaha** owners.

DVD player / recorder problems: 23% of problems are associated with the lack of playback, 14% relate to problems with playback such as pixelation, blocking or a freezing picture, and 12% with the disc drawer sticking.



PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Pioneer (673)	96
Sony (1392)	95
Panasonic (2420)	93
Toshiba (153)	93
Yamaha (79)	92
Sharp (100)	90
JVC (116)	89
Other (1152)	87
Philips (259)	86
Samsung (656)	85
LG (1312)	83
Tevion (123)	80
All DVD players/recorders (8435)	90

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

DRYERS

Hoover, Whirlpool and Miele rank highest for reliable dryer brands. Hoover has begun distributing in Australia again after a long hiatus, so we look forward to testing them in the future.

We consistently recommend **Miele**, **Simpson** and **Bosch** brands, all of which rate highly for reliability as well. 73% of survey respondents have electric vented dryers, while electric condenser dryers are owned by only 11%.

Brand loyalty: A whopping 98% of Miele dryer owners are likely to buy one again, followed by Simpson at 96% and Hoover and Electrolux at 95%.

Dryer problems: Noisy operation was reported as the main issue for dryers, common to 19% of those with a problem, followed by the machine not operating (16%) and 14% for the dryer tumbling but not heating.

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

	(%)
Hoover (335)	97
Whirlpool (95)	97
Miele (300)	95
Westinghouse (456)	93
Simpson (951)	93
Bosch (105)	92
Electrolux (164)	92
Fisher & Paykel (1236)	91
Other (265)	90
LG (135)	89
All dryers (4042)	93

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.



CORDLESS LANDLINE PHONES

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

	(%)
Siemens (135)	93
Panasonic (3215)	89
Uniden (3905)	84
Other (302)	82
Philips (94)	79
Oricom (129)	75
Telstra (979)	73
Doro (200)	67
All cordless phones (8959)	84

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

Cordless phones are made by a limited number of manufacturers, including Panasonic and Uniden. We only test landline phones, so VoIP brands were not surveyed for reliability. **Panasonic** and **Uniden** made our last What to Buy list (*CHOICE*, February 2011, page 58); both are comparatively reliable brands. However, **Siemens**, whose phones we have also previously recommended, is the most reliable brand.

Brand loyalty: 89% of Panasonic, 86% of Siemens and 83% of Uniden owners were likely to buy these brands again, while other brand owners were significantly less likely to repurchase their brands due to poor performance.

Cordless phone problems:

18% of problems relate to the phone no longer charging properly, 17% with noise interference and 12% with unsatisfactory reception.



If your appliance breaks down after the written warranty expires, you may still be entitled to statutory warranty

LAWNMOWERS

In our last lawnmower test (*CHOICE*, November 2009, page 58) we recommended **Rover** and **Victa** brands; however, *CHOICE* readers favour two other brands, Honda and Flymo, for reliability (see right).

Brand loyalty: Honda and John Deere owners are most likely to repurchase those brands at 96% and 94% respectively, with Victa coming in at 91% and Masport 90%.

Lawnmower problems: Respondents reported the engine not starting at all (37% noted this issue), while 11% said the starter cord didn't start the motor. >

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *

	(%)
Honda (569)	89
Flymo (163)	88
Masport (434)	86
Rover (423)	83
Victa (1275)	81
Other (1063)	78
John Deere (120)	75
Toro (59)	73
All lawnmowers (4106)	82

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.

CHOICE ONLINE

Find out what other *CHOICE* members are saying about their appliances and brands, and have your say, at www.choice.com.au/reliability

Panasonic comes out on top as the most reliable DVR, STB and camcorder brand

DIGITAL VIDEO RECORDERS (DVRs)

Also known as personal video recorders, DVRs have taken the place of VHS video recorders, using a hard drive to record free-to-air and/or pay TV.

Brand loyalty: 93% of respondents who own a **Panasonic** would be likely to repurchase that brand, followed by **Foxtel** owners at 91%.

DVR problems: Each of the following accounted for 11% of reported problems: hard drive failing; pixelation/blocking/freezing of the picture; not being able to record.

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Panasonic (1699)	93
JVC (67)	91
Sony (603)	91
Pioneer (169)	87
Samsung (134)	81
LG (605)	79
Foxtel (308)	79
Other (1254)	77
Topfield (436)	72
TEAC (55)	65
All DVRs (5330)	84

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand.



SET-TOP BOXES

Digital set-top boxes (STBs) are selling strongly as analog TV is gradually switched off (turn to page 64 for our STB testing). Setting one up with your analog TV is a less expensive alternative to buying a new digital-ready TV.

Brand loyalty: 85% of **Next Wave Digital** owners said they would repurchase that brand, followed by 84% of **Panasonic** owners.

STB problems: 15% of problems related to the tuner not working, 13% involved the picture (pixelation/blocking/freezing) and 12% were poor reception and the STB being unable to deliver some channels.



PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Panasonic (186)	91
Digital+ (100)	90
TEAC (327)	89
Grundig (53)	88
Sony (108)	87
Next Wave Digital (96)	86
Other (1121)	86
Bush (128)	85
LG (177)	85
Tevion (78)	85
Strong (426)	84
DGTEC (526)	82
DSE (129)	75
Topfield (308)	73
All STBs (3763)	84

* The number in brackets is the number of responses for that brand.

CAMCORDERS

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS *	(%)
Panasonic (647)	94
JVC (388)	94
Sony (1001)	93
Canon (501)	92
Sanyo (78)	90
All camcorders (2615)	93

* The number in brackets is the number of responses for that brand.

Camcorders were last tested in *CHOICE* December 2010/January 2011 (page 54), where we recommended **Canon**, **Sony** and **Panasonic** models.

Brand loyalty: Sure enough, 94% of **Panasonic** owners are likely to buy that brand again, followed by 91% for **Canon** and **Sony** owners.

Camcorder problems: 14% related to not being able to record or playback and 12% to the batteries failing.





STORY EMILY MCCLUSKEY

Snack attack

In part one of our Better Snacks series, CHOICE sorts out which shelf-stable sweet snacks are worth throwing into your glove box or office drawer, and which should be given a wide berth.

core everyday foods that provide important nutrients our bodies need. Unfortunately, these need refrigeration or have a limited shelf life. Food manufacturers have responded to our increasing snacking habits and need for shelf-stable snacks, and supermarket shelves are brimming with processed snacks – not all of them good for you. How easy is it to spot which are the healthiest snacks and which are confectionery in disguise? >

NUTSHELL

>> Some packaged snacks are nutritionally better than others.

>> The key to good snacking is choosing those low in saturated fat and sugar and limiting portion sizes.

>> Look out for the best savoury snack choices in our May issue.

In today's busy world, meals sometimes give way to snacking or grazing on the go. A snack at hand can mean the difference between getting a quick nutrient and energy fix or going hungry – so hungry that you may end up filling up on junk food instead.

According to the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating*, the best sweet snacks are fresh fruit and yoghurt; they're

SNACK CAKES

Cakes are great to nibble on but can be loaded with fats and sugar, so take care when selecting one. Portion size and the amount of saturated fat are also important.

Look for products that are less than 50g in total and contain less than 5g of saturated fat.

It's difficult to find a cake that is low in sugar, as it is used both for flavour

– especially in reduced-fat cakes – and to improve texture. A cake with at least 3g of fibre should also help to keep your appetite at bay and stop you from going back for more.



WHAT TO BUY

Mills & Ware's Chocolate Muffin Bars (6 bars)

Serve size: 42g Price: \$4.89

E: 672

S: 25.3

F: 14.8

So: 295

Sf: 2.2

Fi: 3.7

These cakes are moderate in saturated fat and contain fibre to help keep you feeling full.

The 49g portion-control pack

means you aren't going to blow out your kilojoule budget. You can still have a muffin without creating a muffin top of your own – just remember to stop at one. Portional control is an essential part of a balanced diet.

To decipher our nutritional information and symbols, see Nutrition Key on page 20.

WHAT NOT TO BUY

Adams Bruce Mini Cakes Light Fruit and Sticky Date (12-pack)

Serve size: 90g Price: \$10

E: 1190

S: 26.9

F: 7.7

So: 220

Sf: 3.2

Fi: nl

They may look on par nutritionally with the Mills & Ware's muffin bars, but a 90g portion means an extra 518kJ and 2g saturated fat.



CHOICE
ONLINE

Go to www.choice.com.au/sweetsnacks to see the full list of sweet snacks we looked at and how they rate nutritionally.

BARs

There are so many snack bars around, it can be hard to sort the nutritious from those that are thoroughly unwholesome. The bad news is that just because a product contains grains, nuts, fruit or yoghurt doesn't necessarily mean it's a healthy choice. Don't be fooled by claims such as "natural" or "contains the goodness of nuts", even if the bar is in the health food aisle.

Yoghurt is considered healthy, but when it comes as a coating on bars, it's more like

faux-gurt, full of kilojoules and made from sugar and hydrogenated vegetable oils that are a source of trans fat. Steer clear of any bar that's coated in yoghurt.

A chocolate-coated nut bar contains just as many kilojoules and fat gram for gram as your average chocolate bar. By swapping it for a low-fat baked bar or low-fat cereal bar, you can avoid a further 200kJ and 30g of fat – the cereal bar also contains 2.3g of fibre.



WHAT TO BUY

Be Light (Aldi) Orange Flavoured Cereal Bar (6 bars)

Serve size: 30g **Price:** \$2.99

E: 462 **S:** 13.6 ▲

F: 2.9 ● **So:** 180 ▲

Sf: 0.7 ● **Fi:** 2.3 //

This bar is low in total fat and has a moderate amount of sugar and sodium. Each bar contains around 462kJ, a good amount of energy for a snack. It also contains fibre, which aids digestive balance and helps keep you feeling fuller for longer.

Go Natural Nut Delight

Serve size: 40g **Price:** \$1.59

E: 872.42 **S:** 20.17 ■

F: 39.85 ■ **So:** 16.39 ●

Sf: 4.52 ▲ **Fi:** 3 //

Nuts are highly nutritious and a good source of healthy fats, vitamins and fibre. Nuts are best eaten raw (see CHOICE, December 2010/January 2011, page 40) as they're stuck together with sugars to get them in a bar form. When choosing a bar, look for one with a high percentage of nuts. This Go Natural Bar is 72% nuts, meaning more nutrition and less sugar.

WHAT NOT TO BUY

All Natural Bakery Oat Slice – Yoghurt, Peach & Mango

Serve size: 100g **Price:** \$1.89

E: 1819 **S:** 23.11 ■

F: 20.24 ■ **So:** 177 ▲

Sf: 13.54 ■ **Fi:** 7.1 //

A high fibre content and "organic oats" can't save this monster of a bar from the bad books. With a 100g serve size, this snack packs enough of an energy punch to be an entire meal. It's also high in sugar and the "yoghurt" coating means it's almost 14% saturated fat.

Nice & Natural Chocolate Nut Bar (almond) (6 bars)

Serve size: 30g **Price:** \$3.99

E: 650 **S:** 28.3 ■

F: 33 ■ **So:** 34 ●

Sf: 7.9 ■ **Fi:** nl

While this product also contains nutritious nuts, it has more in common with a Snickers chocolate bar. Treat this one as an indulgence. If a nut bar is what you crave, choose one that has a high percentage of nuts and is not held together with too much sugar.

DID YOU KNOW?

Snack or indulgence?

There's no universally accepted definition for the term snack, so knowing the difference between a snack and an indulgence is easier said than done. Ideally, a snack should be low in saturated fat and sugar and provide less than 600kJ of energy per serve. Think of snacking as an opportunity not only to fill your belly, but also to maximise your nutritional gains – something you can't do with indulgence foods. Indulgence foods include products such as chocolate, cakes, high-fat biscuits, processed foods in large portion sizes, or anything you would normally reserve for a dessert or treat. If you know the difference between the two, you'll be better equipped to fuel your body sensibly and keep your waistline slim.

Tips for smart snacking

1. Make fruit or yogurt your first choice.
2. Stick to smaller portion sizes of packaged snacks.
3. Watch the saturated fat and sugar content.
4. Choose snacks with <600kJ per serve.
5. Aim for a snack with fibre or combine an small pre-packaged snack with a piece of fruit.
6. Eat whole foods – look for shorter ingredients list and fewer additives.

NUTRITION KEY

E: Energy (kJ) per serve **F:** Total fat (g/100g)
Sf: Saturated fat (g/100g) **S:** Sugar (g/100g)
So: Sodium (mg/100g) **Fi:** Fibre (per serve)

Traffic light criteria are based on the latest recommendations and labelling guidelines established by government authorities in Australia and internationally.

Total fat (g/100g) ● ≤3; ▲ 3.1-19.9; ■ ≥20.
Sat. fat (g/100g) ● ≤1.5; ▲ 1.6-4.9; ■ ≥5.
Sugars (g/100g) ● ≤5; ▲ 5.1-14.9; ■ ≥15.
Sodium (mg/100g) ● ≤120; ▲ 121-599; ■ ≥600.

Dietary fibre per serve
 (no wheat stalk) not much fibre;
 // some fibre; // good source of fibre;
 /// excellent source of fibre.

nl Not listed. **Prices** are what we paid in Sydney supermarkets in January 2011.

SWEET BISCUITS

While also great to nibble on the run, biscuits can contain large amounts of fat and sugar. Look for biscuits that are lower in these undesirables and comes in a controlled portion, as it's easy to

overindulge. A good rule of thumb is if it looks like a chocolate bar or giant cookie, treat it as an indulgence (see Snack vs. Indulgence, left).

Look for biscuits with less than 20g of

total fat and 5g of saturated fat per 100g. Also check how big the portion size is – a giant cookie can house as many kilojoules and as much fat as an entire meal. A 30g portion or less is plenty.

WHAT TO BUY

Paradise Vive Lites Mini Choc Chip Cookies (8-pack)

Serve size: 30g Price: \$3.79

E: 519 S: 34.1 ■

F: 6.8 ▲ So: 325 ▲

Sf: 3 ▲ Fi: 0.9

Cookies are inherently high in fat and sugar, but as biscuits go, these aren't too bad. They're low in fat, and come in a portion-control snack pack.



WHAT NOT TO BUY

Arnott's Tim Tam Fingers (individually wrapped)

Serve size: 40g Price: \$0.99

E: 870 S: 45.3 ■

F: 26.6 ■ So: 170 ▲

Sf: 13.8 ■ Fi: nl

Although they're a delicious national icon, Tim Tams are way too high in fat, sugar and energy and too close to a chocolate bar to be everyday snack. On a positive note, the individually wrapped biscuits should deter you from chomping through



PROCESSED FRUIT

Processed fruit is the most nutritious out of all the categories we looked at, and should be the healthy snacker's first port of call. Fruit will satisfy your sweet tooth while providing lots of important vitamins, minerals and fibre, which is vital if you're relying on snacking to get you through the day. Fresh fruit is best and it is easy to grab a piece on your way out the door, but canned and dried fruit are good options if you need something with a long shelf life.

Watch your portions of dried fruit, as it's a concentrated form of sugar and contains added oils. Some more exotic dried fruit such as mango and strawberry also have added sugars. They can also stick to your teeth, contributing to dental decay. Limit yourself to three or four dried apricots or no more than 40g of sultanas or other dried fruits.

We looked at single serve fruit cups here. Choose fruit cups in natural juice and check the ingredients lists for products with the highest percentage of fruit (58% or more).

WHAT TO BUY

Sweet Valley (Aldi) Peaches in Juice (4-pack)

Serve size: 125g Price: \$2.79

E: 225 S: 9.6 ▲

F: <0.1 ● So: <5mg ●

Sf: <0.1 ● Fi: nl

Fruit cups make a great snack. These have a high percentage of actual fruit, meaning they provide more fibre and a bigger vitamin and mineral hit than comparable products. They're great if you rely on snacks to get you through the day.



WHAT NOT TO BUY

Woolworths Peaches in Mango Flavoured Jelly (4-pack)

Serve size: 120g Price: \$3.58

E: 336 S: 17 ■

F: 0.3 ● So: 54 ●

Sf: 0 ● Fi: nl

Jelly cups contain more added sugar and less fruit than their counterparts in natural juice, and fewer healthy nutrients such as fibre and vitamins. Fresh fruit or fruit in juice are better choices.





STORY KARINA BRAY

Panacea or Pandora's box?

Should pharmacies be selling "health" products with no good evidence they work? CHOICE investigates.

NUTSHELL

- >> People expect pharmacies to sell health-related products that are safe and effective – particularly if these products make clinical-sounding or therapeutic claims.
- >> Always ask your pharmacist about the evidence on which they base their advice.

Once merely dispensaries for medicines and community health information, pharmacies have developed into full-blown retail enterprises, selling all manner of products including non-prescription medicines, vitamins, sunscreens and herbal remedies, as well as cosmetics, toilet paper, nappies and confectionery (see Did You Know?, opposite).

Pharmacists are required to undergo a four-year specialist degree in the chemistry, action and formulation of drugs, and many people believe pharmacists know more about medicines than the GPs who prescribe them. The past president of the Pharmacy Board of NSW, Gerard McNerny, is on the record as saying that "because a recommendation by any pharmacist for any medicine gives that

medicine special credibility, it is essential that the recommendation is soundly and scientifically based.

"The trust in pharmacists and pharmacies is such that simply because a medicine is available in a pharmacy, consumers will infer that the medicine carries the pharmacist's endorsement and recommendation. Therefore, pharmacists must be personally and properly persuaded of the safety and effectiveness of the medicines available in their pharmacies."

In other words, there is an onus on pharmacies to sell stuff that works, and pharmacists to stand by the safety and effectiveness of these products. Knowing that some products pharmacies sell aren't backed up by evidence and can be unsafe (see below), CHOICE put pharmaceutical advice to the test in a shadow shop – see opposite.

DUBIOUS PRODUCTS IN PHARMACIES

- **Ear candles** are long hollow cones inserted in the ear canal and lit. Proponents variously claim the candle draws earwax and "impurities" or "toxins" out of the ear canal, and provides relief from sinus and ear infections, headache and earache, as well as improving hearing. There's no evidence they're effective, and injuries such as burns, perforated eardrums and candle wax blockage of the ear canal have been reported.
- **Homeopathic remedies** Whether homeopathy works has been long debated. Large clinical trials say no, but homeopaths argue

you can't just treat symptoms, you treat the whole person – so a one-size-fits-all homeopathic symptom remedy as used in clinical trials isn't a fair trial. But this one-size-fits-all symptom relief is exactly what's sold in pharmacies, so you should not expect them to be effective.

- **Anti-snore acupressure rings** are metal rings worn on the little finger to prevent snoring by means of acupressure. There's no evidence they work, and in 2010 the ACCC took action against the company to prevent them claiming they do. The product is still sold in

pharmacies and, by virtue of its name, claims to stop snoring.

- **Herbal weight-loss remedies** While some may be better than others, there's no good evidence they provide any significant weight-loss benefit. Keep an eye out for our upcoming review of these products.
- **Hotband** Like the Power Balance that featured in the 2010 CHOICE Shonkys, the Hotband hologram bracelet claims to have powers to improve muscle strength, balance, flexibility and range of motion, as well as alleviating motion sickness and jetlag.

Should pharmacies sell unsafe or ineffective products?

Many people, including the Australian Skeptics, public health champion Dr Ken Harvey and consultant pharmacist Dr Geraldine Moses, have publicly criticised some products available in pharmacies. By selling "quack" products, they argue, pharmacies are taking advantage of people's belief in the credibility of products sold by pharmacists and abusing the trust they're accorded. When products don't work, they're not only a waste of money, but can delay patients seeking more appropriate treatment. Pharmacists should stick to selling safe and effective products supported by scientific and clinical evidence.

However, many pharmacists defend their right to sell the products we've identified, arguing that while they may lack evidence for their effectiveness, there's also no evidence that they're *not* effective. Should one or more of their customers appear to benefit from a particular product, a pharmacist is likely to take that into account when someone else asks about it.

This isn't as cynical as it necessarily sounds. A placebo effect is a genuine and significant aspect of medicine, and a pharmacist with good people skills can size up a customer and determine if it might help them. Pharmacists also point out that even some prescription pharmaceutical products have debatable efficacy, while warnings of serious safety concerns about prescription medicines sometimes emerge after they've been on the market for a long time (recent examples include Celebrex and Reductil). So evidence and safety are both works in progress.

CHOICE VERDICT

As frontline health care professionals, pharmacists play an important role in advising the community about health and medical issues. It's certainly possible that selling questionable products gives pharmacists the chance to entice people into their pharmacies and advise them about more appropriate health care measures and treatments – provided, of course, the customer actually seeks the help of a pharmacist.

Given their training, you'd expect pharmacists' advice to be more evidence-based than that of someone working in a health food store or supermarket. Although we came across some terrific pharmacists in this respect during our shadow shop, we also found some who were indifferent or gave advice without scientific or medical basis.

You should always ask to speak to the pharmacist about a new or novel product you're considering, and ask about the evidence upon which they base their advice. Don't let them fob you off – if you feel you're not being taken seriously, ask for written information or reliable references.

SHADOW SHOP

Pharmacies and advice

Our shadow shopper visited 30 pharmacies across Sydney, and in each sought advice about one of the products investigated. She asked to speak to the pharmacist, but in some cases this was not possible and so she could only speak to an assistant. For each product, she presented with a relevant symptom complaint, and asked two key questions:

- Does it work?
- Do you recommend it?

Lemon Detox Diet

Lemon Detox is a "detoxifying" diet that involves drinking a lemon concoction made from lemon juice and the detox kit mixture of maple syrup and cayenne pepper. The kit also contains a laxative tea and sea salt laxative, and costs about \$90.

Detox diets claim to eliminate the chemicals and toxins that build up in your body. However, there's no scientific basis behind the idea that our bodies need detoxifying – the body does this itself. Cleansing claims aside, detox diets are often used for weight loss, and people will lose weight (primarily muscle tissue, due to lack of protein and water) in the short term because they're not eating. Lack of energy for everyday activities is a real danger on the "optimum" version of the program, which lasts 10 days at only 2500KJ per day.

What the pharmacists said

- Most of the eight pharmacists said the Lemon Detox was hard to do, and some recommended a relaxed version (where you're allowed one meal a day).
- Some expressed caution, pointing out it was expensive and difficult, and suggested our shadow shopper take a brochure to find out more.
- Two pharmacists claimed the kit contained enough nutrients for her to survive for a week. While it's true she probably would survive the week, it is severely deficient in almost all nutrients.
- Our shadow shopper was asked about her general health at only two of the pharmacies. There are certain groups of people who should never follow this type of diet, including pregnant women and diabetics.
- Three pharmacists recommended other, less expensive and possibly safer – though also questionable – detox or slimming products, including a homeopathic product.

The best advice came from a pharmacist who was concerned about using laxatives to cleanse and >

DID YOU KNOW?

Jelly beans are one of the top 10 over-the-counter pharmacy products sold in Australia – specifically, the Pharmacy Guild-endorsed Gold Cross jelly beans. As a source of glucose, it's recommended that people with type 1 diabetes carry jelly beans with them to take whenever they get hypoglycemic. Obviously, they appeal to a wider audience, and occasional consumption as a treat is quite safe.

Although we came across some terrific pharmacists in our shadow shop, we also found some who were indifferent or gave poor advice

SHADOW SHOP

lose weight, and recommended against it, telling our shadow shopper that "there's no evidence behind the detox theory, and if it's for weight loss, it gets down to calories in and calories out".

Magnet pain relief products

Static magnets are weak magnets placed on the body – usually over regions of pain or sometimes acupuncture points – where the power of the magnets is claimed to relieve pain. While safe to use, there have been only a few scientific studies evaluating the effectiveness of magnet therapy, and no overwhelmingly positive results. It's likely that at least part of any treatment effect comes from the pressure and support afforded by the wraps and bands containing the magnets.

What the pharmacists said

- Overall, there wasn't much enthusiasm for the products – more an attitude of "might as well try it".
- Only two pharmacists believed in the power of magnets and recommended them – although one took a good look at the shadow shopper's knee and suggested she try some stretches first.
- When asked if the magnets work, five pharmacists used anecdotes to suggest they do, pointing out that other people swore by them, or that they must work because people keep buying them.
- Three suggested she try a normal support bandage first.

A typical response was: "People keep buying them, so they must work. If you're going to get a support bandage, you may as well get one with magnets – they may help."

High Tech Health Circulation Booster

The Circulation Booster claims to use mild electrical impulses through the soles of the feet to create muscle contractions, to help relieve pain and reduce swelling while seated. The bump refers to "cankles" (a colloquial term for swollen ankles), an ailment about which our shadow shopper complained.

The device is listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods as a Class IIa Medical Device, which means they're safe to use and that the manufacturer is expected to hold evidence to back claims. It costs \$400 online for a complete kit, though it can cost less at chemists. Some private health insurance funds offer a rebate for the machine. Many chemists offer a free trial (as does the company if you purchase online).

There is some anecdotal evidence that the Circulation Booster helps – some people swear by it. However,



CHOICE is not convinced of its efficacy. In 2010, the Therapeutic Goods Administration's advertising complaints resolution panel determined there was no conclusive evidence it could provide pain relief, or that it would reduce cankles, improve circulation, ease arthritic pain, reduce fluid retention and swelling, aid fast recovery from muscular injury or relieve aches and pains.

Of greater concern is that swollen ankles can be a sign of cardiovascular disease – something we'd expect pharmacists to be aware of. Bypassing diagnosis by a doctor and buying the machine off the shelf simply to relieve swollen ankles could delay essential treatment for a far more serious disease.

What the pharmacists said

Of all the products, this one was most enthusiastically supported and recommended. Advice was generally good, and this example illustrates the value of pharmacists being involved in the sale of these products – people buying these online would not be so well served.

- Four out of seven pharmacists recommended our shadow shopper see a doctor.
- At six pharmacies, contraindications such as a pacemaker, metal implants or pregnancy were mentioned, and at five she was told she might be able to get a rebate from her health fund.
- Three offered very good advice on the basis of questions about her health and the problem, including that she should see a GP. However, three pharmacists were keen for her to try the machine, without having asked much about her history or recommending she see a doctor.
- Four recommended the product based at least partly on sales success rather than clinical evidence.

One pharmacist asked why she wanted one and when the swelling was happening. "The pharmacist pointed out that at my age, my legs should not swell from sitting at a desk. I was advised I should get my heart checked and ask my doctor about using the product." ■

NUTSHELL STORY REBECCA GATTO

>> ANCAP aims to raise consumer awareness by comprehensively rating all popular vehicles on their safety. >> Following additional government funding, expect to see changes over the next five years to ANCAP's crash testing protocols.

Raising the bar

We check out the results of ANCAP's latest car safety testing.

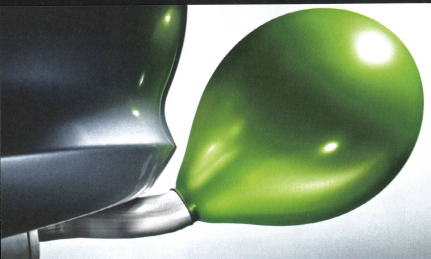
The Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) aims to provide safety ratings for all popular vehicle makes and models. In the future, the overall rating for a vehicle may be raised to incorporate pedestrian safety (currently a separate rating), as well as whiplash protection and roof strength. Car designers are progressively including life-saving safety assist technology, another factor ANCAP will consider.

The latest green vehicle on the market, the Mitsubishi i-MiEV, has received a four-star rating – not a bad achievement, but many light and small cars now earn five stars. Of the four utility vehicles on test, only the Ford Falcon Ute receives the five-star rating, with the remaining vehicles let down by their structural integrity or offset crash result. Protection from serious leg injury for the driver was also poor. To find out how ANCAP assesses cars, visit www.choice.com.au/ANCAP. ■

2011 UPDATED ANCAP CRASH TEST RESULTS

Make / model / year / engine size (airbags) ranked in order of overall occupant protection within categories *	Occupant protection (star rating out of 5)	Pedestrian protection (verbal description or star rating out of 4)
LIGHT CAR		
Honda Jazz GLi 5 door hatch, October 2010 onwards, 1.3L (front, side and head) (A)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Hyundai i20 5 door GL, 2010 onwards, 1.4L four-cylinder (front, side and head) (B)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Hyundai i20 5 door GL, 2010 onwards, 1.4L four-cylinder (dual front) (B)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Holden Barina Spark, 2010 onwards, 1.2L (front, side and head) (C)	★★★★★	na
Mitsubishi i-MiEV 5 door hatch, 2011 onwards, electric (front, side and head) (D)	★★★★★	na
SMALL CAR		
Ford Fiesta Sedan, 2010 onwards, 1.25L (front, side, head and knee) (E)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Honda Insight 5 door hatch, 2010 onwards, 1.3 hybrid (front, side and head) (F)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Kia Soul EX, June 2010 onwards, 1.6L petrol (front, side and head) (G)	★★★★★	★★★★★
MEDIUM CAR		
Hyundai i45 Sedan, September 2010 onwards, 2.4L (front, side and head) (H) (J)	★★★★★	Marginal
Mazda 6 Sports 5 door hatch, August 2003 to July 2005, 2.3L (front, side and head)	★★★★★	★★★★★
LARGE CAR		
BMW 5 Series 530d, 2010 onwards, 3L diesel (front, side and head) (K)	★★★★★	Good
SPORTS CAR		
Peugeot 308CC Sportspack, 2009 onwards, 1.6L (front, side and head)	★★★★★	★★★★★
UTILITY		
Ford Falcon Ute FG Styleside Box, December 2008 onwards, 4L (front and side) (J) (L)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ssangyong Actyon Sports Ute Trade 4x2, 2008 onwards, 2L diesel (dual front) (J)	★★★★★	Poor
Toyota Landcruiser 70 Series Cab/Chassis, 2007 onwards, 4.5 V8 diesel (dual front) (J) (M)	★★★★★	Poor
Nissan Patrol DX Cab/Chassis, 2008 onwards, 3.9L diesel (dual front) (J) (M)	★★★★★	Poor
COMPACT 4WD		
BMW X1 Diesel LHD, March 2010 onwards, 2L diesel (front, side and head)	★★★★★	★★★★★
Hyundai ix35 4x4, August 2010 onwards, 2.2L (front, side and head) (O)	★★★★★	Acceptable
Mitsubishi ASX 2WD, 2010 onwards, 2L (front, side, head and knee) (J)	★★★★★	na
LARGE 4WD		
Toyota Prado GX 5 door, December 2009 onwards, 3L diesel (front, side, head and knee) (J)	★★★★★	Marginal

TABLE NOTES Source: Crash test data from ANCAP, which is supported by Australian and New Zealand motoring clubs, Australian federal and state governments, the New Zealand government, NRMA Insurance and the FIA Foundation. * Unless otherwise stated, the left-hand drive (LHD) European model was tested by Euro NCAP. Australian specifications may vary, and models sold in Australia may provide slightly different levels of protection from those described. **na** No star ratings were available at the time of publication. **(A)** The five-star rating applies to the Jazz with six airbags and electronic stability control (ESC). Side and pole tests were conducted by Euro NCAP. **(B)** Hyundai provided evidence to ANCAP that the three-door variants of the i20 can be expected to provide comparable protection to the five-door hatch tested by Euro NCAP. The five-star rating applies to all i20 variants fitted with six airbags. **(C)** 1L engine was tested; the Australian model has a 1.2L engine. **(D)** Tested by the Japanese crash test laboratory JARI for ANCAP. **(E)** ANCAP was provided with evidence that the Fiesta Sedan provides comparable occupant protection to the Hatch. The rating applies to all Fiesta Sedan variants fitted with seven airbags. Variants with two airbags get a four-star rating. **(F)** Right-hand drive version tested by Euro NCAP. **(G)** Introduced into Australia and New Zealand during 2009. Five-star rating applies to Australian models built from June 2010, when ESC and seat belt reminders for all seats were introduced. A four-star rating applies to earlier Australian models. **(H)** Applies to all i45s built from September 2010, when several production changes were introduced. **(J)** Tested by ANCAP. **(K)** Applies to all variants with four- and six-cylinder engines. The V8 variant is unrated. **(L)** The five-star rating applies to six- and eight-cylinder models fitted with head/chest-protecting side airbags, ESC and a tunnel-mounted transmission control/gear shift. **(M)** This rating only applies to models fitted with dual airbags. **(O)** Applies to all 4x4 and 4x2 variants built from August 2010, when an upgraded steering column and other changes were introduced.



STORY ROSALYN PAGE

How green is your fuel?

CHOICE compares seven different car fuels for environmental sustainability.

NUTSHELL

>> Greenhouse gas emissions are just one part of your car's environmental footprint.

>> E10 and biodiesel produced from waste products are your greenest options.

In response to the growing desire of government and drivers to reduce vehicle emissions, this year NSW and Queensland will phase out unleaded petrol in favour of E10 (see *CHOICE*, November 2010, page 18). This ethanol-blended petrol is also already widely available in other states. However, greenhouse gas emissions aren't the only environmental impact of driving and fuel consumption. A number of other factors, such as depletion of non-renewable resources, toxic pollutants, excess nutrients in water bodies, and smog also need to be taken into account.

CHOICE commissioned Australian environmental assessment agency, Edge Environment, to rate the life cycle impact of seven different fuels:

- E10
- Electricity (for electric cars)
- Regular unleaded petrol (ULP)
- Premium unleaded petrol (PULP)
- Diesel
- LPG
- Biodiesel

NUMBER CRUNCH

75%

of the environmental impact of biodiesel from cooking oil is from the production process and toxic waste water

70%

of the environmental impact of ethanol is wheat production

50%

of the environmental impact of LPG is resource depletion

Its Ecopoint scale rates these fuels – the higher the number, the greater the environmental impact – based on a life cycle assessment using published data and Australian averages from 12 environmental impact categories. The analysis considers many aspects of fuel extraction and production, and takes into account that low-carbon fuels may emit other pollutants at the exhaust pipe. Some alternative car fuel sources contribute more to global warming than traditional ones when upstream (production) and exhaust pipe greenhouse gas emissions are considered.

Production and emissions count

There are significant variations between the fuels when the impact of both emissions and production are assessed. LPG, E10, biodiesel from cooking oil, ultra-low sulphur diesel and unleaded petrol have relatively small production impacts but far higher emissions.

Biodiesel from tallow (animal fat) and canola has high total life cycle carbon emissions and so is higher

in Ecopoints than that from used cooking oil.

Tallow and canola are taken from existing markets, while used cooking oil is a waste product and doesn't attract Ecopoints from production.

Electric cars charged with electricity from renewable sources (hydro, wind and solar) have almost zero Ecopoints. However, electric cars fuelled by average Australian electricity are among the worst-performing options environmentally, because in every state except Tasmania, electricity is not sourced from renewable sources and greenhouse gases are produced in the energy production.

The graph opposite shows how the fuels compare.

CHOICE VERDICT

Your greenest driving option is an electric car powered with alternative energy sources rather than coal-based electricity. However, this type of electricity is only widely available in Tasmania. Nevertheless, you can still choose a fuel that has more environmental benefits than another.

Biofuels (ethanol and biodiesel) produced from waste materials are one of the best fuel choices, but are yet to gain widespread availability. Ethanol and biodiesel from grain or animal fat have some benefits with lower emissions, and are OK fuel choices. It's clear that change is needed to bring about wide-ranging improvements in vehicle environmental impact. ■



ETHANOL SHORTAGES

With the devastating December 2010/January 2011 floods in Queensland, ethanol shortages are likely to affect supply of E10 because of crop damage, according to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). It has warned suppliers to ensure that shortages are clearly labelled on price boards and at the pump. The ACCC also says there could be shortages over the next few years due to increased demand and investment uncertainty.

HOW THE FUELS COMPARE

E10

3.5 ECOPOINTS (ethanol from wheat)

GOOD POINTS

- Ethanol is derived from many renewable materials, such as wheat and molasses.
- It has lower CO₂ emissions and generally produces less air pollution than petrol.
- Replacing petrol with ethanol will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by about 13%.

BAD POINTS

- Experts estimate that ethanol's fuel economy can be up to 30% less than petrol.
- Wheat production contributes to global warming, acidification and resource depletion.
- Greenhouse gas emissions are produced through the refining process.

BIO DIESEL

3 ECOPOINTS (biodiesel from cooking oil)

The impact from production comes from the energy needed for producing this biodiesel.

5 ECOPOINTS (biodiesel from canola oil)

Production and canola seed farming contribute about half of this biodiesel's environmental impacts.

5-7 ECOPOINTS (biodiesel from tallow)

The carbon footprint from cattle farming includes methane emissions and land clearing. The environmental impact can vary with location and agricultural practices.

GOOD POINTS

- If made from agricultural or cooking residues rather than specially grown crops, biodiesel is less expensive, uses less resources and has better CO₂ performance.
- Biodiesel has significantly lower CO₂ emissions than diesel when produced from cooking oil.
- Biodiesel generally produces less air pollution than diesel.

BAD POINTS

- Farming practices can damage biodiversity and the quality of the local environment.
- Biodiesel sources can compete with other crops for land use and raise food prices.
- Higher nitrogen oxide emissions than diesel.

LPG

3.5 ECOPOINTS

GOOD POINTS

- LPG creates less air pollution and toxic emissions than petrol or diesel.
- Lower CO₂ emissions compared with petrol.
- Petrol and diesel vehicles can be converted to LPG.
- Costs less per litre than regular petrol, but will be subject to excise from July 2011.

BAD POINTS

- LPG extraction and refinery processing leads to depletion of fossil fuel resources and emission of greenhouse gases and toxic pollutants.
- LPG still emits considerable CO₂.
- You need about 30% more LPG to drive the same distance as petrol.
- LPG car conversion is expensive and some can't be converted due to space limitations.
- The future cost of LPG when the excise is imposed, not just the current price, should be considered in sustainability analysis.

ELECTRICITY

0-4 ECOPOINTS

Electric cars (general Australian and Tasmanian average electricity)

GOOD POINTS

- When powered by renewable energy (as in Tasmania), electric cars have low emissions.

BAD POINTS

- In Australia, most electricity is provided by coal-fired power stations.
- A large-scale switch to electric cars would likely increase overall electricity demand.

REGULAR UNLEADED and PREMIUM UNLEADED PETROL

4 ECOPOINTS

GOOD POINTS

- Widely available.
- Making petrol engines more efficient may provide some environmental benefits.

BAD POINTS

- Oil is a dwindling resource, and petrol produces more greenhouse gases than diesel or LPG.
- Contains carcinogens such as benzene.
- Premium requires additional refining, adding to its upstream impact.

DIESEL (ultra-low sulphur)

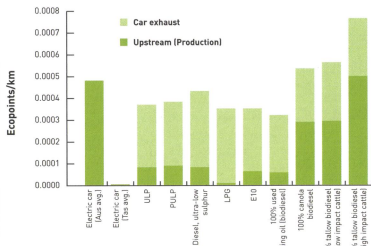
4 ECOPOINTS

GOOD POINTS

- Diesel is more efficient than petrol and E10. Low-sulphur diesel and modern filters have made diesel cleaner in recent years.

BAD POINTS

- Diesel engines are a major source of particle matter emissions, which are linked to cancer and respiratory disease. Diesel has many of the same drawbacks as petrol.



Ecopoints per kilometre based on life cycle environmental impact of fuel.



LANDLINE VS MOBILE

★★★ Do you really still need a mobile and landline phone? ★★★
CHOICE wades through the telco wilderness in search of the facts.

NUTSHELL STORY ANDY KOLLMORGEN

>>> While marketing an ever-growing array of mobile devices and billing plans, the telco industry has provided very little guidance on whether you need to continue paying for a landline.
>>> Landline phones continue to offer some important advantages over mobile technology.

Thinking about upgrading your mobile? See our test of smartphones on page 49.

Figuring out whether you still need your landline phone is almost as hard as getting a grip on your mobile phone plan. As with all things telecommunications, very little is made clear for the customer. These days, most of us can barely make sense of the barrage of bundled packages, cap plans and promotional offers, each of which looks better than the one we just signed up for. Who has the time – or knowledge – to work out whether they should still have a landline?

In an age when almost everyone has a mobile phone, and there's a range of dirt-cheap SIM card-only plans (check out our First Look at Amaysim on page 9) and VoIP (see opposite), does it make good economic and practical sense to ditch your traditional phone line?

What the providers say

Not surprisingly, the two major landline service providers, Telstra and Optus, say landlines still play an important role for certain customers. "The majority of Australian households still enjoy the reliability and value of the home phone line for a variety of reasons, including peace of mind in emergency situations where Triple-0 calls can determine your location using your home phone line. And, they are a cost-effective way for other people to contact them, as local calls are untimed," says Telstra spokesperson Karina Keisler. "They're also a gateway

to broadband internet access and other services such as fax and back-to-base alarms."

Similarly, an Optus spokesperson told CHOICE "there are still a lot of people who value the reliability and rates of their landline, which is why we continue to offer fixed services to our customers". He added that "both fixed and wireless options have their own benefits, which suit different customers based on their specific needs and requirements".

Virgin Mobile's Amber Morris maintains that mobile technology can stand on its own. "I think a lot of people have held on to landlines for their parents and grandparents to call them on," she says. "But now, with the availability of Skype, all this has changed. Mobile phones provide a flexibility that our increasingly mobile nation has embraced and a landline can't compete with. Coupled with increasingly low prices for local and international calls, SMS and data, it's now generally cheaper to use your mobile phone than a landline."

The reliability question

Late last year, Vodafone made what looks like a move to muscle in on the landline market. Starting at \$45 a month, the telco's Infinite Plan offered 1GB of mobile phone data and unlimited calls and texts anywhere in Australia. This undercut Optus' and Telstra's unlimited landline calling plans by \$50 and \$80

Unpredictable service and pricing are two problems with mobile phone technology to keep front of mind if you're thinking about losing your landline

respectively. Shortly after the offer came out, however, a widespread and long-lasting breakdown in Vodafone service had customers complaining about "shocking reception, disgraceful support and awful customer service". (Vodafone declined to discuss its service issues with CHOICE.)

This, along with the continuing frustration of customers as they attempt to figure out pricing plans, underscores two longstanding and perhaps permanent problems with mobile technology – unpredictable service and cost. They're both factors to bear in mind if you're considering getting rid of your landline phone.

Teresa Corbin, CEO of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, says the mobile landscape remains an untamed frontier. "There are no performance standards with mobiles, whereas with landlines you do have standards," she says. "Customer service guarantees for landlines are now in the order of 97%-98% reliability. There are no such guarantees for mobile service, and there may never be." Telstra claims to provide mobile coverage to 99% of the population, but according to Corbin, "no-one's ever going to be able to substantiate that. There are still black spots in metropolitan areas, and you can lose service for any number of reasons, including the number of people who are using the network at any given time."

And when it comes to making mobile phone pricing policies clear and understandable, Corbin characterises the industry's efforts as "extremely poor". "It's not in their interest to make things clear. Plans from the respective providers can change every month, so it's virtually impossible to work out who's offering the best deal."

What the regulator says

For the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), deciding whether or not you should keep your landline comes down to usage habits and location. "Mobile coverage is concentrated in population centres, but is often limited outside these centres," an ACMA spokesperson told CHOICE. "As such, some consumers might retain a landline for voice calls if

mobile coverage is limited where they live or work."

ACMA has taken note of mobile phone pricing issues and is pushing for change, pointing out in May 2010 that "58% of mobile capped plan users report exceeding their capped plan expenditure limit at least once in the past year". It adds that "information around capped plans was a key source of complaint by consumers, with many consumers claiming they were not made aware of the charges that apply once a cap is exceeded, leading to a high incidence of bill shock" (see page 30 for some examples). The regulator is calling for "a standardised telecommunications product statement to allow easier consumer comparison of competing offers" and to ensure that "costs associated with a product or service are clear and unambiguous".

The internet question

The ACMA spokesperson also pointed out that wireless broadband is the industry's fastest-growing market. >

NUMBER CRUNCH

82%

The percentage of adults with a landline phone who are using three or more communication services as of April 2010

33%

The increase in consumers aged 18-24 who chose not to get a landline connection in the 12 months to June 2010

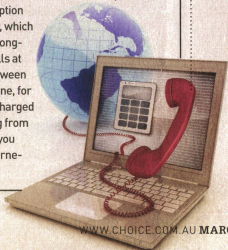
14%

The percentage of consumers who only have a mobile phone and no landline

DID YOU KNOW?

What about VoIP?

VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology lets you make voice calls over the internet. Voice conversations travel through the internet as data packages and can transfer back to the phone network if you're calling a landline or mobile phone. However, like mobile technologies, VoIP has been rocked by reliability issues. Shortly before Christmas last year, VoIP application Skype dropped out worldwide – not the first time the service had come to a standstill. Nevertheless, VoIP services have become a critical low-cost component of many Australians' telco packages and can be used with a VoIP phone, bundled with naked ADSL (see page 30), or used through a web-based application (such as Skype) on a computer or smartphone. Some plans that combine naked ADSL with a VoIP service offer free national calls to landlines in addition to cheap calls overseas. Another option is a Skypeln number, which allows you to make long-distance national calls at local rates (calls between Sydney and Melbourne, for instance, would be charged as if you were calling from within Melbourne if you purchased a Melbourne-based number).





CHOICE ONLINE

Log on to **www.choice.com.au/landline** for our jargon buster of some of the popular wireless options available.

< However, at the moment, depending solely on this technology for internet usage is not a good idea unless you're a very light user. "Fixed-line networks continue to carry the bulk of data downloaded from the internet – 91% at June 2010. If consumers want flexibility in terms of where they wish to access broadband, wireless internet will be attractive. If, however, they're seeking to use bandwidth-hungry applications, landline or fibre will be more suitable."

There's also an economic consideration. An 8GB mobile broadband package from Optus sells at about \$40, for instance, while for about \$50 you can get up to 120GB of data with a landline set-up.

Last month, Telstra announced its new 4G mobile network technology – due for release at the end of the year – would offer speeds on par with fixed connections. But critics have dismissed these claims, saying top speeds are only available if users are near a tower and network traffic is minimal.

Costs of keeping (or ditching) your landline

The mass movement to mobiles has made life expensive for landline owners whenever they call mobiles from a different provider, as these calls are often not included in unlimited calling plans. One CHOICE staffer got a shock when her partner, a university lecturer, racked up some hefty charges after conducting lengthy phone conferences from a landline with his very mobile-centric students.

A number of consumers got rid of their landline phones following the introduction of naked ADSL, which is often bundled with VoIP packages so you can make phone calls cheaply over the internet without having to pay monthly line

rental charges. However, the ADSL still runs through the landline, and activating it can be costly. One CHOICE staffer's attempt to set up a naked ADSL account with TPG hit a roadblock when Telstra informed him he would have to pay a connection fee as well as line rental for at least three months; another said dumping his landline was "a big hassle. We had a contract with iPrimus for both internet and landline and were unhappy with them, so we decided to switch to iiNet. For some reason we had to cancel our landline and get a short-term contract with Telstra in order to switch, so we had to wait for a Telstra technician to change over the numbers.

"A week later, iiNet switched the number over so we had a working internet connection, but this was after hours on the phone with iPrimus, Telstra and iiNet service centres. And the hassle didn't stop there. The bill we got from Telstra afterwards was incorrect and that problem took three months to fix."

CHOICE VERDICT

Before deciding whether or not to ditch your landline, take a look at how and who you call, including where you live, how many calls you make and where you call. If you're a fairly heavy user of both home phone and internet – and reliability is important – keeping your landline may make good sense. (And if you're a habitual long-distance caller and have an internet connection, getting a handle on VoIP can save you money either way.) But if you're a light user who lives in a metropolitan area and rarely exceed your monthly mobile phone cap, it may be time to hang up on your landline. ■

CASE STUDY

Battering bill shock

Proving that mobile only is a more cost-effective alternative to the mobile/landline combination is all but impossible, since mobile pricing plans remain so complicated and variable that consumers often get hit with unexpected charges.

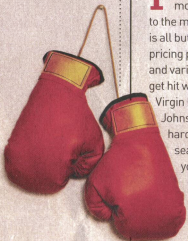
Virgin Mobile customer Stuart Johnson recently found this out the hard way after doing some web searching while on holiday. "If you reach 90% of your credit limit, they're supposed to let you know by SMS," he says. "I got a text at 2am, at least three days after it should have come. By then, the bill

for my \$35 monthly rollover plan was \$396. I had no idea my credit limit was so high [\$400]. Virgin certainly didn't make it clear – they waffled on with so much stuff during the sales process that it was impossible for me to work out what was important and what was not."

Shane, a lawyer who's no dummy when it comes to understanding contractual terms, got burnt by roaming charges on his iPhone 3GS with a \$79 cap plan from 3 network (a division of Vodafone). "We were staying in Hamilton Island, which is part of Australia last time I checked," he says. "I used my phone to check

the internet a few times, and before I knew it I had racked up about \$70 in roaming charges. I was lucky I didn't download anything.

"After the first incident, I decided not to use the internet. Then I found out the phone accesses the internet even when I don't want it to. I made some calls from Townsville, but unknown to me, 3 has no coverage in Townsville. At no point did anyone tell me that I would get hit with roaming charges if I went outside capital cities. Even if it's in the fine print, there's no way to fully understand where you do and don't get coverage."





NUTSHELL

>> Once you've moved into a retirement village, exorbitant exit fees can lock you in and limit your future choices.

>> Services provided may change or ongoing fees may go up by more than you've budgeted for.

About 5% of Australians aged 65 and older live in retirement villages. They're a growing sector, with the number of villages increasing by more than 8.5% over the three years to July 2010. The majority of accommodation options in a retirement village are independent living units, with only about 7% being serviced apartments. While independent living units allow you to purchase services such as meals and cleaning, a retirement village is usually not suitable if you need a high level of care. In that situation, consider a nursing home.

Moving to a retirement village is not just a lifestyle decision, but also a financial one, as extremely high exit fees could mean you don't have enough money left over to seek alternative or more suitable accommodation.

Why move to a retirement village?

Many of the services available in a retirement village can also be accessed from your own home, especially if you move to a low-maintenance unit. You can get a cleaner or gardener, order Meals on Wheels, receive daily calls from the Red Cross and have an emergency button installed.

In some cases, these services are subsidised by the government. However, retirement village residents such as CHOICE member Merryl often mention the lifestyle and community spirit as one of the reasons they enjoy living in their village. "It feels as though we live in a resort," she says. "The people are extremely friendly and there is a tremendous spirit. We have a wonderful manager and an active social committee."

Tip: Contact your local council to find out what activities and services are available for older people in your local area.

Contract traps

Should you decide to move into a retirement village, state laws give you some limited protection. But

STORY UTA MIHM

Village life

Moving to a retirement village can be a costly exercise. CHOICE outlines five key issues to consider before deciding one way or another.

you'll still need to look beyond the sales pitch and go through the contracts carefully to fully understand the financial implications. Pay particular attention to the following five issues:

01 What type of contract? The main types of contract arrangements are:

- **Strata title** You pay an agreed amount to a former resident or the operator, and then own the unit outright. You usually also need to enter into a service agreement with the operator.
- **Loan and licence** may be offered by not-for-profit organisations such as churches. You usually pay a contribution in the form of an interest-free loan.
- **Leasehold** The lease is usually registered on the title deed, which protects you if the village is sold. You pay a lump sum for the leasehold. Entry, ongoing and exit fees can apply to all three contract types.

Tip: Some retirement villages offer a rental agreement, and usually only charge rent without requiring a large entry contribution.

02 Entry costs There are large variations in entry fees for retirement villages, depending on factors such as location, facilities, the age and condition of the unit and other fees to be paid.

According to Peter McMullen, National Director of Health and Aged Care from real estate services firm Jones Lang LaSalle, entry fees for a two-bedroom unit in a retirement village could range from \$200,000 to \$400,000 to between \$1 million and \$2 million. On average, a two-bedroom unit in a retirement village costs about 90% of the median house price in the area in which it's located (the median house price is based on all types of properties and not restricted to two-bedroom units). >



NUMBER CRUNCH

1870

The number of retirement villages in Australia

116,000

The number of dwellings within those villages

142,000

The number of retirement village residents

< On average, two-bedroom units less than 10 years old cost just above the median house price, whereas older-style units (more than 30 years old) can be available for half the median house price.

Tip: In some states, such as NSW and SA, you have a 90-day cooling-off period during which you can move out and pay only market rent and some costs. But beware, depending on the contract terms you may only get your entry fee back once your unit is resold.

03 Ongoing costs cover any services provided, maintenance and a management fee for the village owner. According to Jones Lang LaSalle, average monthly fees for a retirement village are about \$350 per month for independent living units, but can range from \$280 to \$650 per month and up to \$1000 per month for resort-style villages in some areas.

One area of concern for residents is that the services these fees cover may sometimes change. "We used to have two emergency buttons in the bathroom, one of

them inside the shower," says one resident. "One day I came home and my wife told me they had removed the emergency button in the shower. We weren't notified of this in advance." The main problem, however, is that ongoing fees can increase more than expected. "The only disappointing aspect has been the increase in monthly fees," says Merryll.

Some states regulate increases in monthly fees. In NSW, unless there are fixed increases for ongoing fees in your contract, increases greater than the consumer price index (CPI) can only come into effect if the residents agree or if the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal (CTTT) orders so. However, the operator is still in a much stronger position than the residents. "We rejected the budget for two items of about \$50,000 in total and went before the CTTT," says John. "The tribunal agreed with us, but now the operator has lodged an appeal in the district court and we have to decide whether we can keep defending this, given the large legal costs that could arise."

Other ongoing costs include services such as your telephone, gas and electricity.

Tip: Check the terms of the contract for what happens if you move out of your unit or pass away, as you or your estate may be responsible for ongoing fees for months (if not years) afterwards, depending on when your unit is sold.

04 Exit fees Also known as deferred management fees, exit fees can be very complicated and may include one-off and/or annual charges over a specific period of time, for example 10 years. Examine your capital gain entitlement carefully as you may only get part or none at all, and so suffer a significant capital loss – see Devil in the Detail, right. You may also have to make a contribution to refurbish the unit, such as for new carpet or paint.



RETIREMENT VILLAGE CHECKLIST

As well as checking on the contract traps, consider:

- **Discussing your options with family and friends.**
- **Visiting a number of retirement villages** to compare services, facilities and financial arrangements.
- **If you can access local facilities** such as GPs, shops, hospitals, libraries, churches, clubs and public transport?
- **Is there adequate parking for visitors?**
- **If you can have someone stay over for a visit or move in.**
- **Whether the services and facilities at the village will still be suitable as you get older.** Are there any stairs, for example, and are the paths easy to access?
- **Whether you can make changes to the inside of premises** – for example, in the event you need a wheelchair.
- **If you can have a pet.**
- **Are the grounds pleasant and well-tended?**
- **The security arrangements.** Is there sufficient external lighting, for instance?

Residents point out that it can take a long time before you receive your exit entitlements; this usually depends on how soon your unit is resold. The worst example we've heard about is from Steve, whose mother passed away eight years ago, but her estate is only receiving the exit entitlements now.

Tip: Depending on your contract, in some states, such as Victoria and SA, there can be special rules so that you will receive your entitlements after a certain period if you need to go to an aged care facility and pay an accommodation bond – even if your unit hasn't sold.

05 Future care The majority of accommodation options in a retirement village are independent living units. It's a good idea to think about your future needs and check whether the retirement village also offers serviced apartments or whether the operator is an approved provider for community aged care packages, which may allow you to stay in your unit for longer.

Nursing homes are sometimes located within retirement villages – but don't assume your future care is secured if you move into such a village. Nursing home

places are regulated by the federal government and their allocation is determined on a needs basis rather than whether or not you're an existing resident.

CHOICE VERDICT

It's crucial that prospective retirement village residents get financial as well as legal advice. While lawyers and financial advisers versed in retirement contracts may not be easy to find, it is well worth the effort. Contact the fair trading or consumer affairs office in your state or territory for further information and to familiarise yourself with the relevant laws.

CHOICE will continue our research into retirement village contract traps. In particular, we're concerned about:

- **Lack of transparency** due to non-standardised contracts that are difficult to understand.
- **Lack of ability to move elsewhere** because of high exit fees (see below).
- **Contract traps**, which affect a potentially vulnerable consumer group at a time of life when their choices are already limited. ■

CAN YOU HELP?

If you or one of your relatives live or have considered living in a retirement village and have experienced any problems, we'd like to hear from you. Write to us at **money@choice.com.au** or Money Team, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204, and please include a daytime phone number.

CASE STUDY

Devil in the detail

Nine years ago, Joan and Edward each bought a two-bedroom unit in different retirement villages with different fee and capital gains structures; both cost \$360,000. Edward paid a 32% fee [3% annual fee for nine years plus a 5% sinking fund contribution] while Joan paid a

one-off 20% fee. But Joan receives only a 20% share of the capital gain, whereas Edward gets 80%. If there is an 8% capital gain, Edward comes out on top; but in the case of a 2% capital gain, both suffer a similar capital loss. By comparison, if they'd bought a low-maintenance unit, they would

have received the full value – \$720,000 in the first scenario and \$430,000 in the second.

Note: Other costs such as refurbishment and selling costs have not been taken into account and would also have to be deducted from the payout figure.

RETIREMENT VILLAGE VS LOW-MAINTENANCE UNIT

	JOAN	EDWARD
Entry price	\$360,000	\$360,000
Deferred management fee	20% one-off	3% per year *
Total fee after nine years	\$72,000	\$115,000
Resident's portion of capital gain	20%	80%
SCENARIO 1: Selling price: 8% – capital gain over nine years	\$720,000	\$720,000
PAYOUT FIGURE	\$360,000	\$530,000
SCENARIO 2: Selling price: 2% – capital gain over nine years	\$430,000	\$430,000
PAYOUT FIGURE	\$300,000	\$300,000

TABLE NOTES * For the first nine years, plus a one-off 5% sinking fund fee in the first year. All figures are rounded.



NUTSHELL

STORY HANNAH GREW

>> CHOICE members were most satisfied by manual therapies such as physiotherapy as treatment for their back pain.
>> GPs had the lowest complete satisfaction score, but most can only provide medication for pain relief or offer information or specialist referrals.

What a pain

Most people will suffer back pain at some stage in their lives. CHOICE members share their advice about treatment options.

Most of us have winced at a shooting pain or pulled muscle in our backs. In fact, 80% of adults will experience at least one episode of back pain in their lives, and more than \$1 billion is spent on treatment each year. Causes of back pain vary greatly, and the back pain treatment options and resulting success even more so.

Specific back pain can be associated with an underlying health condition or damage to the spine, such as sciatica or a slipped disc. But most frustrating can be pain without an identifiable cause. Non-specific pain accounts for 95% of acute low-back pain cases, and is associated with muscle strains, sprains, minor injuries or pinched nerves.

CHOICE surveyed more than 770 members who have experienced lower back pain in the past 12 months to find out how the pain affected their lives, as well as who and

what they turned to for treatment. We also asked members who've undergone back surgery in the past five years to see if they were happy with their treatment decision.

The medicine cabinet

Whether from poor posture, an accident, incorrect lifting or exercising, when pain strikes for most of us, instinctively we reach first for the painkillers. Current clinical practice guidelines in Australia recommend taking paracetamol as a first line of treatment for pain. Ibuprofen is not recommended for asthmatics or those with gastro-intestinal problems, but can be taken alone or in a combination with paracetamol if paracetamol alone isn't effective.

Medication should always be taken in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. If you

have any concerns about your medicines, discuss them with your doctor or pharmacist before commencing treatment.

Many people also use hot and cold packs to help relieve back pain. More than half of CHOICE members who used these found them to be beneficial, with almost 30% saying it helped a lot. Topical medicated creams also rated well, with more than 60% of members surveyed saying they helped a little and 23% saying they helped a lot with back pain relief.

Doctor, doctor!

If over-the-counter medicines are not providing relief, you may wish to visit your GP. They can prescribe stronger pain medications, and can also discuss other

treatment options with you, including manual therapies or a referral to a specialist for chronic pain.

When we asked our members to rate medical professionals for how they dealt with their back pain, GPs rated worst for complete satisfaction. However, the majority cannot provide additional help beyond pain medication and information about other treatment and therapy options.

Of CHOICE members who were referred to a specialist and underwent back surgery, 28% reported back pain as completely gone in the four weeks following surgery, and 49% as getting better. Of the members surveyed who'd had recent surgery for back pain, 90% had no regrets about their treatment decision. >

KEEP MOVING

Clinical guidelines for the treatment of back pain indicate that, where possible, keeping moving is a key part of regaining full back health. Gentle forms of exercise such as walking, swimming, Pilates and Tai Chi may be beneficial.

CASE STUDY

The sporting injury

From a young age, Michael has been an active footballer. "I've played football all my life, but being in the front row I was always bent over in a scrum." In his mid-20s, on the advice of his GP, he sought treatment from a physiotherapist for back pain. Michael finds that his pain depends on how active he is.

"There was a period when I first got married and had kids where I didn't play a lot of sport. But once I started playing sport again and exercising, that was when the pain started coming back."

Michael has tried various back pain treatments for the past 35 years, but these days he opts for a combination of chiropractic therapy and deep-tissue massage for relief. He admits that treatment is very individual. "I have friends who swear by acupuncture," he says.

Most of the time, Michael rates his back pain as 3-4 out of 10, but an increase to a level of 5-6 signals that he needs to seek

treatment. "It helps to stretch all those muscles. I play golf as well and I don't stretch as much as I've got older, so my muscles are very taut. When I try to hit a golf ball I end up straining a little bit.

And sitting behind a desk a lot for work also doesn't help. X-rays show I've got a couple of disks in my lower back that are a bit smaller than they should still be. Their width or height has diminished over the years.

"Last year I walked the Kokoda Trail. Before leaving for Papua New Guinea, I spent nine months training while carrying heavy packs. I found the deep tissue massage really limbered and extended my muscles for me while I was doing this."

When it comes to pain medication, Michael takes Nurofen Plus for relief. "I was taking Voltaren but the



chemist told me should take Nurofen Plus because it's gentler. I've found it's just as effective.

"One thing I have changed at home is my pillow. I have one of those contoured pillows, which I bought from the chiro. I've been using it for the past six months and I like it. I also bought one for my wife, but she didn't like it. I do find that sometimes the pillow can get too hot, but it offers good support for my neck."

To find out which pillow will best suit you, see Pillow Talk, CHOICE, February 2011, page 20.

Close to 80% of CHOICE members surveyed who sought physiotherapy for back treatment were completely or somewhat satisfied

DID YOU KNOW?

What about manual therapies?

Physiotherapy

Physio rated highest for member satisfaction, with 79% of those who tried it somewhat or completely satisfied with the result of their treatment. Physiotherapists use a variety of evidence-based treatments, including exercise, massage and joint manipulation, to help repair injuries and rehabilitate the body.

Chiropractic

Chiropractors focus on balancing the body through adjustments to your spine, skull and pelvis. Chiropractic treatment rated second-highest with CHOICE members for satisfaction, with 76% of those polled somewhat or completely satisfied.

Osteopathy

Often confused with chiropractic treatment, this is another form of therapy based on the relationship

between the structure of the body and the way it functions. Osteopaths use stretching and massage, along with manipulation of joints and soft tissue. Osteopaths rated third with CHOICE members, with 72% somewhat or completely satisfied.

Acupuncture

Of the members who tried acupuncture, 45% were completely or somewhat satisfied. Part of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture treatment involves inserting fine, sterile needles into specific sites to clear "energy blockages". Practitioners may also use cupping, laser therapy, electro-stimulation and massage.

Bowen therapy

Bowen therapy is a holistic approach to pain relief, based on the belief that the underlying cause or source of many musculoskeletal, neurological, neuromuscular and

other health problems can be found in the body's soft tissue.

Alexander technique

Developed by an Australian actor, the Alexander Technique is based on improving the posture and carriage of the body to give health benefits.



CONTACTS

According to Jonathon Kruger from the Australian Physiotherapy Association, there is a proliferation of profession titles that allude to being a health expert and may mislead consumers. Always check that your therapist is accredited with a professional organisation, such as these listed below.

- **Chiropractors' Association of Australia:**
www.chiropractors.asn.au
- **Australian Physiotherapy Association:**
www.physiotherapy.asn.au
- **Australian Osteopathic Association:**
www.osteopathic.com.au
- **Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association:** www.acupuncture.org.au
- **The Bowen Therapists Federation of Australia:**
www.bowen.asn.au
- **Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique:** www.austat.org.au

TIPS FOR BETTER BACK HEALTH

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Keep active
- Learn to lift correctly
- Ensure your mattress and pillow are providing enough support
- Avoid slouching – use your core stomach muscles to maintain good posture and protect your lower back
- Make sure your computer and desk are ergonomically set up
- Check your kids' schoolbags are not too heavy for them and are adjusted for maximum comfort
- Don't sit or stand in the same position too long – move around!





STORY ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

Paydirt on payback times

How will changes to the payback times for solar photovoltaic panels affect your bottom line?

NUTSHELL

>> Government subsidies for solar PV power systems are being wound down, so the sooner you install your PV system, the quicker it will pay for itself.

NUMBER CRUNCH

\$6200

The average amount residents in sunnier states, such as Queensland and WA, can expect to receive for their STCs for a typical 1.5kW solar PV system installed before 30 June 2011

\$5320

The average amount residents in less sunny states, such as Victoria and Tasmania, can expect to receive

Sources: Alternative Technology Association and the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency.

Last year, CHOICE outlined how a solar panel power system could eventually pay for itself and even generate a small income for you (see www.choice.com.au/pvpanels). But subsequent changes to subsidies and the retail prices of solar photovoltaic (PV) panel systems have affected the payback times we published for your state or territory. In response, CHOICE asked the Alternative Technology Association (ATA) to recalculate approximate payback times for a 1.5 kW solar system in each state and territory (see table, below). The good news is that, in all states and territories except NSW (see Consumer News, page 5), average payback times have shortened.

Small-scale technology certificates (STCs)

STCs, formerly known as renewable energy certificates (RECs), help subsidise the up-front costs of installing PV systems. They apply to the first 1.5kW of capacity installed for systems connected to a main electricity grid. An STC represents one megawatt-hour of energy generation from a renewable source, and is tradeable. STCs created for small-scale PV systems are currently subsidised by the government under the Small-scale Renewable Energy Scheme. Households that install PV systems between 9 June 2009 and 30 June 2011 will receive five times

the STCs to which they would normally be entitled. This multiplier will be decreased by one every financial year from 1 July 2011 until 30 June 2014.

PV system owners can choose to sell their own STCs within a year of installing the system through a voluntary clearing house established by the Office of the Renewable Energy Regulator at a price close to the \$40 per certificate mandated by legislation. This involves a lot of paperwork and takes time, but will ensure you get a reasonable price per certificate. However, retailers of PV systems usually discount the up-front cost of installation in exchange for the created STCs. This option is generally quicker and easier, and in most cases may result in a similar price per certificate.

Feed-in tariffs

This is the rate you're paid for electricity that grid-connected panels contribute to the local power network. The key distinction between feed-in tariff plans is how you're paid for the energy you feed in. Gross metering is when you're paid for all the power you feed in, as is the case in NSW and ACT. If you're only paid for the difference between your household's production and use, this is the net metering system, available in other states and territories. ■

UPDATED PAYBACK TIMES FOR A 1.5kW PV SYSTEM (IN YEARS)

STC multiplier	Export rate (%)	ACT	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
5	100 (A)	5	9	na	na	na	na	na	na
5	75	na	na	4	3-5	5	20+	6	6
5	50	na	na	4	4-6	6	20+	8	7
4	100 (A)	7	13	na	na	na	na	na	na
4	50	na	na	6	6-8	8	20+	10	9
4	75	na	na	5	5-7	6	20+	7	7

USING THE TABLE Results are approximations only, as they depend on your inputs and assumptions. Allowances should be made for the decline in panel output over time and the need to replace the system inverter. The following zones were used for the purpose of STC calculation: **NT:** Zones 1-3; **SA:** Zone 3; **Tas:** Zone 4; **Vic:** Zone 4; **WA:** Zone 3; **NSW:** Zone 3; **ACT:** Zone 3. Visit www.orcr.gov.au/publications/sgo-stc-calculations.html to find out what zone you're in.

The calculations assume the following: **System size:** 1.5 kW. **System cost** (fully installed, before payment for STCs): \$9000. **STC price:** \$35. **STC multiplier:** Both the current x5 STC multiplier and x4 STC multiplier, which is set to come into effect on 1 July 2011. **Electricity export rate for net feed-in jurisdictions** (NT, Qld, SA, Tas, Vic and WA): The two scenarios assume households export 50% and 75% of the electricity they produce. **Electricity export rate for gross feed-in jurisdictions** (NSW and ACT): Assume 100% export of the total electricity produced based on the latest feed-in tariff policy in the state/territory. **System degradation rate:** 0.5% per annum. **Inverter replacement** (after 15 years): \$1350. **Annual increase in retail electricity price:** 3%. **Annual discount rate (opportunity cost) of money that could have been invested instead:** 6%. **TABLE NOTES (A)** A 100% export rate is only possible where there is a gross feed-in tariff, i.e. NSW and ACT. **na** Not applicable. Source: Alternative Technology Association (ATA).



STORY KARINA BRAY

No sweat

Which antiperspirants are likely to be more effective – and can you trust their grand claims?

NUTSHELL

- >> Antiperspirants reduce wetness caused by sweating, while deodorants only mask or reduce the unpleasant odour associated with sweat.
- >> Dove Minimising claims to reduce prickliness between shaves, but most of our testers didn't notice any difference.

Sweating is your body's way of dealing with excessive heat. Exercise, over-stimulated nerves (caused by anxiety or fright), fever, spicy food and external heat and humidity can all cause sweating. The sweat produced by your armpit's sweat glands is rich in proteins, ammonia and fatty acids, and the warm, moist conditions are ideal for sweat-hungry bacteria.

While the sweat itself doesn't smell very strong, bacteria that break the sweat down into organic compounds produce an unpleasant smell. Hair in armpits increases the surface area for bacteria, contributing to that body odour most people prefer to avoid.

Even though the terms are used interchangeably, there is a difference between antiperspirants and deodorants:

- **Deodorants** contain antibacterial ingredients that help reduce the numbers of odour-causing bacteria, and may also contain perfumes that mask the smell.
- **Antiperspirant's** active ingredient is aluminium salts, which help reduce sweating by temporarily plugging pores and also by constricting or shrinking the pores due to their astringency. Antiperspirant products don't completely prevent sweating, and often contain deodorising ingredients as well as antiperspirants to reduce smell.

Which are the most effective?

Generally, the higher the aluminium content, the more effective the antiperspirant. Ingredients such as talc and other absorptive minerals can also help reduce the feeling of wetness. Roll-ons tend to be more effective than sprays, because they provide better coverage.

Most antiperspirants contain aluminium in the form of aluminium chlorohydrate. Other, less common forms include aluminium zirconium complexes, which are slightly more effective and longer-lasting than aluminium chlorohydrate. However, these are not permitted in aerosol products due to the inhalation risk.

Until recently, antiperspirants were regulated as medicines, and the quantity or proportion of active ingredient had to be listed on the label. However, in September 2007, antiperspirants were reclassified as cosmetics, so now their total ingredients must be listed, but not the amount of active ingredient. While this is useful for people sensitive to particular ingredients, it also means you can no longer tell which is likely to be the more effective antiperspirant simply by looking at the label.

A poll on CHOICE's website confirmed most people want to know the percentage of aluminium in antiperspirants, so we asked the major manufacturers to provide us with this

DID YOU KNOW?

The facts behind the claims

"Sensitive skin"

Some products claiming to be hypo-allergenic or for sensitive skin may contain little or no fragrance or alcohol and/or soothing moisturisers.

"No white marks"

Some products claim to reduce the white powdery marks left on clothes and skin. CHOICE's user trial three years ago found they lived up to their claims.

"Clinical protection"

Dove and Rexona offer stronger products containing aluminium zirconium salts that are best applied at night on clean skin.

"48-hour protection"

The gel plugs formed by aluminium can remain in the pores, reducing sweat flow for a long time, even with showering. Some products claim to offer 48-hour protection, which

means the products have been tested to ensure the plugs remain in place for this length of time. This could be useful if you're travelling or camping and can't shower daily.

"Nivea silver protect"

Silver has antimicrobial properties, and may help reduce odour by attacking the odour-producing bacteria.

information. Unfortunately, many chose not to oblige. We know that many contain about 5% aluminium; if you'd prefer a stronger product, you could consider one of the following (aluminium content listed in brackets):

- **Garnier Mineral Roll-On** range (10%)
- **Nivea Silver Protect for Men Roll-On** (15%)
- **Mitchum** (21.4%)
- **Driclor** (20%)
- **Rexona and Dove Clinical Protection** range (20% – overseas equivalent product).

Are antiperspirants bad for you?

Some people argue that the body sweats for a reason, and so antiperspirants that stop you sweating are bad. However, the adult human skin has several million sweat glands over almost your entire body, with only one per cent located in the armpits – so antiperspirants won't cause you to overheat. They also don't prevent perspiration completely. A standard antiperspirant may only reduce sweating by as little as 20%, while even the best ones reduce sweating by less than half.

Many people are also concerned about the aluminium in antiperspirants. Aluminium is an extremely common element, found in air, water, food, medicines, utensils and many other everyday objects and substances. It's been linked with Alzheimer's disease due to its accumulation in the brain tissue of Alzheimer's patients, although it doesn't appear to cause the disease. To put the aluminium content in antiperspirants in perspective, it's estimated we eat about 5mg-20mg of aluminium per day, more than 99% of which is passed without being absorbed into the bloodstream. The aluminium content absorbed from antiperspirants has been measured at about four micrograms – roughly 2.5% of the amount that's actually absorbed each day from the gut.

As for the claim that antiperspirants are the "leading cause of breast cancer" – a decade-old scare campaign still spread over the net – this myth was debunked years ago by world health authorities, who point out there is no evidence that using antiperspirant is even a risk factor for developing breast cancer, let alone a leading cause of it. Nevertheless, if you're still concerned about using aluminium products on your skin, the alternative is a deodorant.

Triclosan is an effective antibacterial agent used in some deodorant products. However, many GPs and scientists are calling for it to be banned from cosmetic products due to concerns about its impact on bacterial resistance and natural ecosystems as well as potential endocrine-disrupting effects. Tea tree oil and silver are effective alternative antibacterial products that we recommend.

Deodorant crystals are a popular alternative among the anti-aluminium set. They contain alum, an astringent that may help reduce perspiration by shrinking or constricting pores, and may also have antibacterial properties.

What if you sweat a lot?

Hyperhidrosis is the medical name for excessive sweating, and is believed to affect about two percent of the population. People with the condition suffer in numerous embarrassing ways, including having to change clothes several times a day, feeling self-conscious when they shake hands, being unable to hold a pen properly and having damp, smelly feet. They're also prone to dermatitis, skin rashes where sweat collects in skin folds and fungal infections such as tinea. Hyperhidrosis can be a symptom of a more serious underlying condition, and you should consult your doctor if you're concerned about excessive sweating.

The first line of treatment is antiperspirant with a high level of aluminium chlorohydrate. Dermatologists recommend Driclor, which is available in pharmacies. You usually have to apply these to clean skin before bed when you're less likely to sweat, to maximise absorption.

Botox injections have been successfully used to disable nerves responsible for activating sweat glands in armpits, hands and feet. However, they're expensive (about \$1000-\$1500 for armpits), may produce unwanted effects in other muscles (especially when used in the hands), and the sweat-reducing effects are only temporary (about six to nine months).

Surgery to reduce the number of sweat glands in your armpits, such as liposuction or curettage, removes skin containing sweat glands; this is usually considered a last resort, as is sympathectomy (destroying the nerves responsible). ■

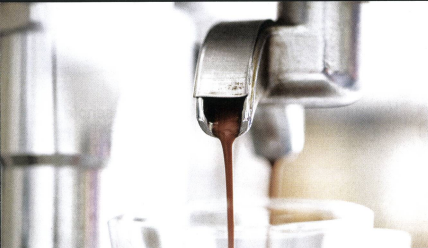
You should consult your doctor if you're concerned about excessive sweating, which may be a symptom of a more serious underlying condition

USER TRIAL

A prickly subject

Last year, Dove launched a new product, Dove Minimising Antiperspirant Deodorant, which promises to "reduce the prickly feeling between shaves". A spokesperson for Unilever (which owns the Dove brand) told CHOICE it achieves the effect by coating the hair to make it feel softer and finer. To find out whether the product lives up to its claims, we gave it to 15 women to try for five weeks. They used the Dove product under one arm, and their usual product under the other for comparison.

Of the eight women who reported feeling a prickly sensation between shaves, only three noticed a difference in the prickly feeling and said they'd buy the product in the future, while another two trialists said they'd buy it because they liked the fragrance (our trialists were given the Nature Fresh variant) and found it an effective antiperspirant.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

A bitter taste

Spending big on an espresso machine does not guarantee the best-tasting cup of coffee.

NUTSHELL

>> 11 newly tested models join our previously tested models for a total of 27 manual and semi-automatic espresso machines, priced between \$159 and \$1899. None of the new products makes our What to Buy list.
>> The newly tested machines don't deliver on taste. However, you may be able to achieve better results by using better beans.

CHOICE has been testing espresso machines for a while now, and we know what makes a good cup of coffee. Our latest round of testing does not uncover any jewels; however, before you decide not to buy one you've got your eye on, keep in mind our testing indicates how well these machines deliver a good cup of coffee using a popular supermarket brand of beans. Better results can be achieved with better quality beans; the right mix of bean, grinding and barista skills all contribute to a coffee worth drinking (see below).

We tested 11 new machines – five manual, five semi-automatic and one hand pump (see *CHOICE*, March 2010, page 54, for a description of these varieties). One manual machine on test,

the Nuova Simonelli, has a perfect milk-frothing score, but a less-than-inspiring coffee-making performance. Perhaps most tellingly, four of the most expensive machines on test round out the bottom of our table (page 44).

All our What to Buy selections (right) are previously tested machines, four of which use the thermoblock heating system, which heats on demand. Some machines, such as the Rancilio, use a boiler, which heats a larger amount of water and are said to keep the temperature fairly consistent. However, our testing found neither thermoblock nor boiler technology is a good indicator of temperature. Both technologies are designed to produce hot water for brewing and steam for frothing milk. >

COFFEE-MAKING TIPS

- **Flush about a litre of water through your new machine** to clean it thoroughly. Be sure to push a cup of hot water through the steam wand as well as the group, group handle and the filter.
- **Switch the pump on to check how the hot water comes out when the group handle isn't attached to the group head** once you've heated up the machine. Some machines tend to overheat the boiler/thermoblock, which makes the water too hot and burns the coffee granules. If this happens with your machine, let some water out before making your coffee.
- **The standard amount of ground coffee for an espresso is 7g for 30mL of water.** If you like your coffee stronger and with more flavour, try increasing it to 8g or even 9g (if you dare!), or reducing the amount of water to 20mL–25mL.
- **Don't run more than 30mL of water through the machine** if you're making a short black, as this will extract unwanted flavours and make the coffee too bitter.
- **Always use water straight from the tap** unless it has a noticeable chlorine flavour, or use bottled water.
- **Keep the group handle in the group head during the warm-up period** so that every part of the machine that comes into contact with the coffee gets hot.
- **A warm cup keeps the coffee hot.** Some machines have an in-built cup warmer. If not, just run some hot water from the machine into the cups instead.
- **Run a small amount of water through the machine after you've frothed the milk to cool the internal parts down.** This is important if you're going to make more coffees, as the extra heat from the frothing process can burn the grind.



WHAT TO BUY



76% Sunbeam Café Latté EM5600

PRICE \$329

GOOD POINTS

- Best machine overall.
- Good for frothing milk.
- Easy to use.
- Drip tray full indicator.
- Exterior is very easy to clean.
- Cup-warming plate.

BAD POINTS

- No cord storage.



73% Breville Fresca BES860

PRICE \$800

GOOD POINTS

- Good for frothing milk with the froth enhancer removed.
- Good coffee-making score.
- Easy to use.
- Drip tray full indicator.
- Cup-warming plate.
- Programmable coffee quantity.
- Has in-built grinder.
- Controls are easy to use.
- Cord storage.

BAD POINTS

- The exterior is not particularly easy to clean.



BEST
BUY

72% Sunbeam Café Espresso EM 3800

PRICE \$199

GOOD POINTS

- Good coffee-making score.
- Good for frothing milk.
- Easy to use.
- Exterior is easy to clean.
- Cup-warming plate.

BAD POINTS

- No cord storage.



70% De'Longhi Nespresso Essenza EN95R

PRICE \$379

GOOD POINTS

- Programmable coffee quantity.
- Spent coffee capsules are easy to remove – no need to clean up (used) coffee grinds.
- Compact unit.
- Very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK taste test score and for frothing milk.
- Can only make one cup of coffee at a time.
- Can only be used with capsules, not ground coffee.
- Small water tank.
- Indicator lights are hard to see.
- Doesn't accommodate larger cups easily.
- No cord storage.



70% Rancilio Miss Silvia 09

PRICE \$790

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for frothing milk.
- Cup-warming plate.
- Controls are easy to use.
- Cord storage.
- The group handle/filter is very easy to use.

BAD POINTS

- Only OK taste test score.

MEET THE EXPERTS



David and Matthew Gee run the Barista Basics Coffee Academy in Sydney. **Fiona Mair** is CHOICE's home economist. She's a food expert with extensive experience in judging cooking and taste test results.

An espresso machine's controls should be easy to use, with labels that are simple to understand and clearly visible operation lights

ABOUT THE REST

While six of the 11 newly tested machines have OK coffee-making scores, seven have borderline or poor taste test scores and none makes our What to Buy list.

The highest-scoring machine of the newly tested models, the

Ilve by Ascaso DU 16, only has an OK coffee-making score, but is very good for frothing milk with the froth enhancer removed.

Both newly tested **Breville** machines are OK overall; however, the **Café Venezia BES250** only has an

OK taste score and the **Café Modena BES230** a poor taste score.

Both the newly tested **DeLonghi** and **Lavazza** capsule machines are the easiest to use; however, the DeLonghi has an only OK taste score while the Lavazza's is borderline.

PRODUCT			PERFORMANCE							FEATURES	
			Overall Score (%)	COFFEE-MAKING					Automatic power turn-off	Cup-warming plate	
Type				Coffee-making score (%)	Taste test score (%)	Coffee temperature score (%)	Coffee temperature range score (%)	Ease of use score (%)			Milk-frothing score (%)
Brand / model (in rank order)											
Sunbeam	Café Latte EM5600	Manual	76	76	75	75	85	76	75	✓	✓
Breville	Fresca BES860	Semi-automatic	73	71	70	72	75	76	75 (D)	✓	✓
Sunbeam	Café Espresso EM3800	Manual	72	72	70	75	83	72	70		✓
DeLonghi	EN95R Nespresso Essenza (A)	Semi-automatic	70	65	65	75	58	82	60		
Rancilio	Miss Silvia 09	Manual	70	65	65	73	60	74	90		
# Ilve	by Ascaso DU 16 (B)	Semi-automatic	69	66	65	76	68	68	85 (D)		✓
Sunbeam	Café Series Twin EM6910	Semi-automatic	67	57	50	72	98	80	85	✓	✓
# Breville	Café Venezia BES250	Manual	67	64	60	75	80	74	65 (D)	✓	✓
Sunbeam	Artista EM 5900	Manual	66	59	55	71	75	76	80		✓
Breville	BarVista BES200	Manual	65	63	60	75	75	72	60 (D)	✓	
# DeLonghi	EN265CVAE Citiz and Milk (A)	Semi-automatic	65	58	55	74	70	82	60		
# Krups	XP 5280	Semi-automatic	65	64	60	81	80	78	35	✓	✓
Breville	800ES	Manual	63	56	50	75	83	74	75 (D)	✓	✓
# Lavazza	A Modo Mio Premium (C)	Semi-automatic	62	55	50	82	65	84	40		
Gaggia	Classic	Manual	60	55	50	74	80	76	40		✓
# Breville	Café Modena BES230 (B)	Manual	60	53	45	77	93	70	70 (D)	✓	✓
# Nuova Simonelli	Oscar Professional	Manual	60	52	45	73	88	64	100	✓	
Saeco	Via Venezia Espresso	Manual	59	49	40	80	93	72	80 (D)	✓	✓
# Gaggia	Baby Twin	Semi-automatic	59	56	50	73	88	74	35		✓
Breville	Café Roma ESP8C	Manual	57	48	40	76	83	72	70		✓
Lavazza	A Modo Mio Extra (C)	Manual	54	41	35	82	48	80	55		
# Sunbeam	Café Crema EM4800C	Manual	53	45	35	76	90	62	70 (D)		✓
# Sunbeam	Café Espresso EM3600	Manual	51	45	35	79	88	56	70		✓
# La Pavoni	Stradivari SPL	Hand pump	48	44	35	84	73	46	75		
Ilve	by Ascaso Dream MF Versatile	Manual	47	35	25	69	80	68	60		✓
Bugatti	Diva	Manual	46	44	35	75	83	48	50		✓
La Pavoni	Stradivari STL	Hand pump	35	18	10	79	18	60	60		

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Coffee making: 60%; Ease of use: 30%; Milk frothing: 10%. **Coffee-making score** is made up of: Taste test: 80%; Coffee temperature: 10%; Temperature consistency (when making four consecutive cups of coffee): 10%. **Heat-up time** is the time taken to heat the machine to operating temperature. **Price** Recommended retail, as of January 2011.



**CHOICE
ONLINE**

For some tips on how to froth milk, see our online story at www.choice.com.au/espresso

The **Krups** and **Gaggia Baby Twin** have the equal-lowest milk-frothing scores, followed by the **Lavazza A Modo Mio Premium**.

The **Nuova Simonelli** has a perfect milk frothing but poor taste test score and is borderline for making coffee.

The two newly tested **Sunbeam** machines, along with the **La Pavoni**, have the lowest taste test scores.

The **La Pavoni Stradivari SPL** is borderline overall, with poor scores for coffee making and taste tests. It also scores lowest for the ease of use.

SPECIFICATIONS

quantity	Type of heating system	Measured heat-up time (min:sec)	Time taken to froth 200mL of milk (min:sec)	Dimensions (cm. H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price (\$)
	Thermoblock	0:45	2:00	33 x 26 x 27	9.1	sunbeam.com.au	329
	Thermoblock	0:45	1:20	37 x 33 x 31	10.4	breville.com.au	800
	Thermoblock	1:45	2:00	33 x 21 x 27	5.8	sunbeam.com.au	199
	Thermoblock	1:10	0:55 (E)	26 x 17 x 29	3.0	delonghi.com.au	379
	Boiler	2:25	0:45	35 x 24 x 29	12.0	grinderscoffee.com.au	790
	Boiler	2:45	1:00	40 x 27 x 31	15.9	ilve.com.au	1899
	Thermoblock	2:15	1:20	38 x 33 x 33	11.0	sunbeam.com.au	799
	Thermoblock	1:05	2:00	33 x 23 x 29	5.9	breville.com.au	230
	Thermoblock	0:45	1:20	34 x 27 x 31	8.2	sunbeam.com.au	449
	Thermoblock	1:00	2:00	31 x 22 x 28	4.5	breville.com.au	170
	Thermoblock	1:10	1:20	28 x 24 x 38	4.7	delonghi.com.au	549
	Thermoblock	0:50	0:47	32 x 23 x 28	5.0	krups.com	400
	Thermoblock	2:00	2:00	32 x 26 x 31	11.2	breville.com.au	450
	ns	1:45	1:30	31 x 24 x 36	4.9	lavazza.com.au	399
	ns	6:00	1:10	36 x 22 x 27	7.3	gaggia.com	600
	Thermoblock	1:55	1:35	30 x 23 x 23	5.1	breville.com.au	190
	Boiler	9:30	0:30	39 x 30 x 37	14.2	siennacoffee.com.au	1399
	Boiler	1:30	1:20	33 x 24 x 29	7.0	saeco.com.au	399
	Boiler	6:00	1:00	40 x 25 x 27	7.3	saeco.com.au	799
	Thermoblock	2:30	1:40	31 x 23 x 23	5.6	breville.com.au	200
	ns	1:20	1:00 (E)	31 x 24 x 36	4.8	lavazza.com.au	299
	Thermoblock	1:55	1:35	33 x 24 x 27	6.4	sunbeam.com.au	209
	Thermoblock	1:40	1:45	33 x 21 x 28	5.8	sunbeam.com.au	159
	Boiler	10:00	0:40	32 x 21 x 44	6.0	euroespresso.com.au	1490
	ns	2:00	1:15	34 x 24 x 28	7.3	ilve.com.au	1099
	Boiler	3:00	1:20	38 x 25 x 27	7.6	coffeemachine.com.au	1099
	Boiler	6:50	0:50	32 x 21 x 31	5.8	euroespresso.com.au	1149

BLE NOTES # Newly tested models. **ns** Not stated. **(A)** Nespresso Roma capsules used. **(B)** Discontinued, but may still be available in stores. **(C)** Lavazza A Modo Mio capsules used. **(D)** This was done with the froth enhancer removed. This method gave a better result. **(E)** 100mL only at a time.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Milk frothing mechanism If you like milk-based coffees – cappuccinos, lattes or mochas – check it will make the desirable creamy froth without large air bubbles.

An exterior with few cracks and crevices will minimise trapped dirt and allow for easier cleaning. Stainless steel and brushed aluminum take some extra effort.

Programmable coffee delivery With semi-automatic machines, this allows you to adjust the amount of coffee in your cup.

Controls should be easy to use, labelling simple to understand and operation lights should be clearly visible.

Cup-warming plate All newly tested machines have one except the DeLonghi, Lavazza and La Pavoni. It's also a good idea to warm the machine for 15 minutes prior to use, to keep the temperature consistent over consecutive cups.

A large-capacity water tank that's easy to fill, a **large filter basket** that's easy to fill and empty, and an **easy-to-clean drip tray**. Remember also to keep water in the tank fresh.

Shop where you can try out the model you want to buy. Most shops have an extensive display of espresso machines.

HOW WE TEST

Residual taste Our tester, Peter Horvath, pumps a litre of hot water through each of the machines and then makes 12 consecutive cups of espresso coffee. This isn't for testing, but rather to remove any factory smells and tastes.

Taste The taste test forms the bulk of the coffee-making score, and for this we invite our regulars [see Meet the Experts, page 43] to rate 30mL espressos (short blacks) from each machine in a blind taste test.

Temperature After warming up the machines, Peter measures the coffee temperature produced in each machine immediately after the coffee has stopped flowing out of the group head. This is repeated after 15 minutes.

Ease of use He checks how simple the machines are to use, trying out the controls, the group handle/filter and how easy they are to refill with water.

Froth He froths milk in a jug, looking for a fine, pourable texture, while assessing how easy it is to use the frothing mechanism.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

One-pot wonder

As the cooler months approach, a slow cooker that produces hot, healthy and convenient meals can be a wise investment.

Some members are keen to buy one with a delayed timer, which you can set to turn on or off while you're away. CHOICE advises against this, as leaving food in the cooker at room temperature will breed bacteria. If you find your slow cooker turns off prematurely, throw the food out – it's not worth the risk of food poisoning. >

NUTSHELL

- >> Slow cookers are convenient and produce great meals.
- >> When in use, the outside of a slow cooker can reach temperatures high enough to burn, so keep out of reach of children.

When CHOICE last tested slow cookers back in 2008, we were impressed by their convenience. Simply cut up some vegetables in the morning or night before work, prepare some meat and chuck it all into the slow cooker along with some herbs, and voila – a hearty dinner awaits when you arrive home.

Slow cookers have improved since then, with some featuring inner pans in which you can sear meat so you don't have to cook and transfer meat from another pan. Our equal top-performing model, the **Breville ikon BSC560** (see right), has this feature.

CHOICE compared the energy consumption of the slow cookers with a ceramic cooktop. There are substantial differences in time between the two cooking methods: an eight-hour, low-setting slow-cooked meal takes three hours on the cooktop, and a four-hour high setting in a slow cooker takes an equivalent 1½ hours on the cooktop. We found that over the course of one year, the cooktop is less expensive for the longer cooking time, but roughly equal to the slow cooker for the shorter cooking time. For sheer convenience, however, the slow cooker will win many over, despite the added expense.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Size Consider how much food you expect to cook for you and your family, the cupboard space required for storage and bench space for usage. Round slow cookers can take up more space than rectangular ones.

Controls Look for bright indicator lights and a control switch that's easy to access and is clearly labelled.

Exterior There should be few or no cracks or crevices in which food could get trapped.

Cleaning Each part should be easy to clean. A stainless steel exterior may show fingerprints.

! WARNING – HOT SURFACE

The external temperatures of slow cookers are hot enough to burn if you touch them while they're cooking. Anecdotally, we've heard some slow cookers melt their feet or their power cord; however, none on test gave temperature measurements high enough to do this. Nevertheless, you should always make sure the power cord is not touching the cooker's surface.

HOW WE TEST

Cooking performance Our home economist, Fiona Mair, assesses each slow cooker by cooking corned beef on the low setting and chilli shredded beef on the high setting. The corned beef test, with identically sized pieces of corned silverside, serves to check the cooker's ability to cook a dish at a low temperature over an extended period of time (eight hours); the chilli shredded beef test (with dried beans) establishes how well each cooker can cook a dish at high temperatures over a shorter time (four hours) without it sticking to the bottom. Fiona assesses how good the dishes look and taste when cooked. Scores are awarded for appearance and texture, with deductions for dark or dried-out areas, overcooked texture or dishes sticking to the pot.

Ease of use Fiona assesses how easy the cookers are to assemble, store and clean. She also considers the external temperature of the cooker surface, handles and controls during operation. For our test recipes, visit www.choice.com.au/cook.

WHAT TO BUY



85% Breville
ikon BSC560

PRICE \$200

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for low- and high-setting performance.
- Comprehensive instruction manual with recipes.
- Removable cord for serving at the table.
- Cooking pan can be placed onto a stove for searing.
- Non-stick pan sits comfortably on any cooktop (but is not suitable for induction stoves).
- Stainless steel rack supplied for roasting.

BAD POINTS

- Non-stick pan can scratch easily.
- Unable to see food when cooking due to stainless steel lid.
- Large ceramic cooking bowl can be difficult to wash in a domestic sink.



85% Kenwood
CP657

PRICE \$70

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for low- and high-setting performance.
- Comparatively inexpensive.
- Lid handle is large with finger protection from hot surface.
- Basic instructions with recipes.

BAD POINTS

- Large ceramic cooking bowl is not dishwasher-safe, and can be difficult to wash in a domestic sink.
- Cooking leaves white marks on ceramic bowl.



83% Russell Hobbs
Abbey Lane RHG802

PRICE \$80

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for low- and high-setting performance.
- Lid handle is large with finger protection from hot surface.
- Basic instructions with recipes.
- Black exterior is easy to clean.

BAD POINTS

- Large ceramic cooking bowl can be difficult to wash in a domestic sink.
- Cooking leaves white marks on ceramic bowl.

If you find your slow cooker has turned off while you've been away, throw the food out to avoid the risk of food poisoning

ABOUT THE REST

The **Maxim** was discontinued shortly after testing, but may still be available in some stores.

The **Breville BSC300** has the equal-best low-setting performance but is let down by its ease of use score.

Most of the remaining slow cookers have very good or excellent scores for low-setting performance, including the **Tiffany**, **Kambrook**, **Breville BSC400B**, **Russell Hobbs RHSC600**, **George Foreman**, **Sunbeam HP5590**, **Ronson** and **Crock-Pot**. Only the Crock-Pot is borderline for its high-setting performance, taking two hours longer than the other cookers on test to cook the chilli shredded beef dish and producing a more watery sauce. Both Sunbeam and Crock-Pot claim to have released improved models since we tested.

The **Belle** and **Morphy Richards** have poor low-setting performance scores, but perfect results for their high-setting performance.

GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SLOW COOKER

- **Slow cookers should be filled to between half and two-thirds of capacity.** Freeze leftovers if that's more than you need.
- **Food cut into similar-sized chunks will cook more evenly.** Place your meat on top of any veggies.
- **All food should be completely thawed and perishable food kept refrigerated** before putting it into the slow cooker.
- **Avoid putting the slow cooker insert in the fridge before cooking.** If you do, take it out 30 minutes before turning it on, otherwise it will take longer for the cooker to heat up and increase the risk of bacterial growth. Let it cool down before placing it in the fridge after cooking.

- **Throw food out if there's a power failure while you're out and your meal's cooking** as it may be unsafe to eat.
- **Cutting vegetables the night before will lower your preparation time in the morning** if you're leaving a meal to cook for the day.
- **Boil dry beans for at least 10 minutes before adding to the bowl** to destroy toxins that will otherwise survive the lower temperatures of a slow cooker.
- **Reduce the amount of liquid by half and increase the cooking time** to convert a traditional recipe for use in a slow cooker. About one hour in the oven equals about six to eight hours on low in a slow cooker.

- **Leave out any dairy products, fish or seafood** and add them when you get home, or within the last half hour of cooking.
- **Don't check on the dish once it's started cooking.** Lifting the lid and letting moisture and heat escape extends the cooking time.
- **Some ingredients may require preparation on the cooktop first,** such as browning mince, searing chunks of meat or cooking onions, garlic or spices.
- **Don't keep food in the slow cooker for too long once it's cooked.** It needs to be kept hotter than 60°C (or cooler than 5°C) to avoid harmful bacteria growth.
- **Don't use a slow cooker to reheat leftovers** – use a microwave, cooktop or oven instead.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE	FEATURES	SPECIFICATIONS	COSTS
Brand/ model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooking performance – low setting (%) Cooking performance – high setting (%)	Ease of use score (%) Auto setting Cooking bowl suitable for dishwasher / fridge Dimensions (cm, W x H x D) Weight (kg) Claimed capacity (L) Shape Contact	Annual running cost – low setting (\$)* Annual running cost – high setting (\$)** Price (\$)
# Breville ikon BSC560	85	90 90	77 ✓ ✓ / ✓	47 x 28 x 23 4.8 7 Rectangle breville.com.au 52 40 200
# Kenwood CP657	85	100 90	70 ✓ - / ✓	43 x 25 x 32 5.6 6.5 Oval kenwood-australia.com 57 38 70
# Russell Hobbs Abbey Lane RHG802	83	90 90	73 ✓ ✓ / ✓	41 x 22 x 31 5.6 6 Oval salton.com.au 55 36 80
# Maxim KitchenPro SCS-5 (A)	82	90 90	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	40 x 24 x 30 4.8 5 Oval maximhousewares.com 46 31 50
Breville BSC300	79	100 75 (B)	67 ✓ ✓ / ✓	40 x 26 x 30 5.4 5 Oval breville.com.au 36 22 90
# Tiffany SC65SS	79	90 80	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	41 x 24 x 32 5.3 6.5 Oval gafcontrol.com.au 41 40 59
# Kambrook KSC110	76	90 70	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	42 x 28 x 32 5.9 6 Oval kambrook.com.au 59 30 80
# Breville Banquet BSC400B	75	90 70	67 ✓ ✓ / ✓	49 x 26 x 32 6.1 6.5 Rectangle breville.com.au 56 40 110
Russell Hobbs RHSC600	75	80 75 (B)	70 ✓ - / -	41 x 24 x 30 5.6 6 Oval salton.com.au 40 39 80
George Foreman GFSC35	74	80 60 (B)	80 ✓ - / ✓	34 x 22 x 25 3.6 3.5 Oval salton.com.au 33 21 60
# Sunbeam HP5590	73	90 60	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	43 x 29 x 31 6.3 5.5 Oval sunbeam.com.au 54 33 100
# Ronson Banquet RSC550	72	90 60	67 ✓ ✓ / ✓	45 x 25 x 34 6.7 5.5 Rectangle target.com.au 56 30 44
Belle SC55	70	40 100 (B)	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	42 x 24 x 29 4.8 5.5 Oval saabappliances.com.au 52 35 50
# Crock-Pot HP1550	70	90 50	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	44 x 26 x 31 5.9 5.5 Oval sunbeam.com.au 52 35 70
Morphy Richards 48715	70	40 100 (B)	70 ✓ ✓ / ✓	41 x 24 x 30 6.1 6.5 Oval asko.com.au 52 35 90

USING THE TABLE SCORES The overall score is made up of: Cooking performance – low setting: 30%; Cooking performance – high setting: 30%; Ease of use: 40%. **Price** Recommended retail, as of February 2011. **TABLE NOTES** # Newly tested model. * Based on low-setting cooking for eight hours per day, three days per week. ** Based on high-setting cooking for four hours per day, three days per week. (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores. (B) Previously tested models used a soup recipe instead of chili shredded beef, but scores are comparable.

NUTSHELL

>> Applications can enhance your smartphone so it suits the way you work and play.
 >> Check your smartphone is optimised for your phone network.



STORY DENIS GALLAGHER

Smarter for you

Make sure your next smartphone has what you want, not what you're told you need.

Mobile phones were introduced in the 1980s, and over time they evolved from a large brick-like device to a slightly smaller brick. During the 1990s, pocket-sized phones with unique designs were all the rage. The early 21st century has seen the arrival of the smartphone, a customisable device that can be most things to most people in a constantly connected world.

Nokia had a range of mobiles in the early 2000s that were popular in the corporate world, yet were seen as too difficult to use and too expensive for the everyday consumer. However, the introduction of the iPhone in 2008 made the smartphone more accessible, with its unique touchscreen display and online application store proving extremely popular. While a large number of the 400,000 apps, available for free or a couple of dollars, are just for fun, others such as public transport timetables with live updates, airport booking tools, online banking and car navigators have transformed these devices into more than just a phone.

The Apple iPhone remains the most popular smartphone model, but Google's Android is now the most widely used operating system (OS), with Google providing its Android phone software to mobile phone companies for free. Recently, the

Android OS eclipsed both Apple and Nokia as the most widely used smartphone operating system in the world, now featuring in one-third of all smartphones sold.

A connected world

You may not need a computer and a wireless broadband network to operate your smartphone, however it becomes a much more effective tool at home if you do. Most smartphones have Wi-Fi connectivity, allowing you to surf the net, download songs and video or check email using your home internet data allowance. In fact, you may find yourself using your home computer or laptop less, as your phone can be the perfect tool for many online tasks that require a simple read-and-confirm action, such as online banking, checking email or updating your status on Facebook. >

WHAT TO BUY

HTC Wildfire	\$480
Samsung Galaxy 580	\$329
Apple iPhone (16GB)	\$859
Nokia 5230	\$245
Nokia C6-00	\$405

WHAT TO BUY



72% HTC Wildfire

PRICE \$480

HTC has contributed to the success of the Android operating system, with several popular touchscreen mobiles released over the past 12 months using the Android OS. The HTC Wildfire running Android OS 2.1 delivers a lot of features for the price.

Our testers found the display to be very good, with excellent web browsing and support for Flash allowing you to watch online videos on the high-resolution screen. Photo performance for the Wildfire is one of the best on test, using a five megapixel camera with LED flash, although the lack of a second front-facing camera may be an issue if you want to video-call family and friends.



72% Samsung Galaxy S80

PRICE \$329

Like HTC, Samsung has used the Android operating system for several of its smartphone models, with the Galaxy S80 using Android OS 2.1. While the Samsung's capacitive touchscreen is very responsive, its overall screen quality is not as good as other recommended models.

The phone is very easy to use for general operations and is excellent for browsing the web. However, its camera performance and lack of flash may be an issue if you want to use the mobile as a replacement for your digital camera.



71% Apple iPhone 4 (16GB)

PRICE \$859

The iPhone 4 is a strong replacement for the phenomenally popular iPhone 3GS, with an improved display and front-facing camera among some of its additional features. The large, easy-to-use touchscreen with very good display allows you to quickly and easily select one of the many apps that come with the phone or online, where there are literally thousands more available for free or to purchase.

Although the iPhone is one of the few phones without a memory card slot, it does provide a choice of 16GB or 32GB internally. While prices for smartphones have been dropping steadily, the iPhone is still one of the most expensive models available.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

GPS While most of these phones provide support for online map services such as Google Maps, a dedicated GPS chip using an offline navigation application allows you to use your phone to find out exactly where you are without the phone network. Most Nokia phones allow you to download a car navigation app for free, while the Apple and Android online stores have a range of applications available to buy.

Wi-Fi capability, available on all the recommended phones except the Nokia 5230 (see above), allows you to browse the internet using your wireless connection at home or at a Wi-Fi hotspot when you're out and about. Using your home

wireless network often costs less than using your mobile network when browsing or downloading from the net.

A dedicated button for camera or music player means you can use your mobile's music player or camera function without wasting time working through the menu selections.

An LED flash can be very useful when taking a photo with a mobile when the available light is low.

A front-facing camera allows the mobile phone to be used for video calls when connected to another video caller or computer user with webcam.

Stereo bluetooth (A2DP) allows you to listen

to your music without cables via a pair of Bluetooth stereo headphones.

Headphone connection type A 2.5mm or 3.5mm jack will allow you to use a standard set of headphones to listen to music.

A memory card allows you to store photos, video and music. Check to see the exact type of memory you'll need, as the tiny cards all look similar but aren't interchangeable.

A capacitive touchscreen, made popular on the Apple iPhone, operates by recognising the touch of a finger without significant pressure needing to be applied. This touchscreen works well when swiping your finger to make a selection or using multiple finger selections such as zooming in on a web page. The



71% Nokia 5230

PRICE \$245

The Nokia 5230 is an entry level smartphone with a resistive touchscreen display. The music player is very good, and although the two megapixel camera is among the lowest resolution on test, it still produces reasonable photos for small prints or sharing online.

Web browsing is just OK compared with the other phones, and the lack of Wi-Fi support will hamper its use at home. However, its SMS performance is very good and the phone's general performance make it an ideal choice as a first smartphone. Like all Nokia phones using the Symbian OS, the application support and general features and functionality are starting to feel dated compared with the latest Android OS and Apple iOS 4.

alternative is a **resistive touchscreen**, which works well with a stylus or finger but requires more pressure to be applied. Most of the latest smartphones use a capacitive touchscreen.

A QWERTY keyboard may be available as a virtual keyboard showing up on the mobile's touchscreen, while a physical keyboard is shown as an extended keypad or slide-out mini-keyboard and can be useful for heavy SMS or social network users.

The specific absorption rate (SAR) of the phone indicates the amount of energy per kilogram of body weight absorbed when using the phone as claimed by the manufacturer. Although evidence relating to exposure to electromagnetic fields is inconclusive, you may



71% Nokia C6-00

PRICE \$405

For mobile phone users who prefer to use a keyboard, the Nokia C6 contains a standard phone keypad as well as a slide-out QWERTY keyboard, making it ideal for heavy SMS and social network users. It has a good display but is the only phone in our recommended list without a touchscreen.

The phone is easy to use and good for composing an email or sending an SMS, but is not as effective for web browsing. Like the Nokia 5230 using the Symbian OS, application support and general features and functionality feel dated.

want to choose a phone with a lower SAR value if this is of concern to you.

Network Before buying your next smartphone, make sure it is optimised for your mobile network. While many of the phones on test offer a model that is optimised for Telstra's Next G (850MHz) or Optus Yes G network (900MHz), you'll need to be clear which version you want as there are often two versions of the same model to suit different networks. Before buying, confirm with the salesperson that the phone supports 850MHz if you're with Telstra or 900MHz for Optus. If you have a plan with another carrier, all you need is support for 3G at 2100MHz.

OPERATING SYSTEMS

Your mobile phone's **operating system (OS)** delivers the framework to perform tasks beyond simply making a call, allowing the phone to run productivity and music or media players.

- The **Symbian OS** is the oldest OS, and until recently the most widely used, and is found in Nokia phones. Symbian is starting to fall behind the latest Android and Apple OS versions, with Nokia announcing it will use Windows Mobile future smartphones.
- The **Blackberry OS** has a reputation for secure business functionality with support for multiple email accounts; however, the other phone OS are catching up in this regard.
- The **iPhone OS 4** has gained a significant share of the smartphone market since being introduced. However, it is only optimised for the iPhone 3GS and 4.
- **Windows Mobile 7** has a familiar Microsoft Windows look and feel, however the Windows Mobile share of the smartphone market is only just reestablishing itself after being overrun by Apple and Google's Android OS.
- **Google's Android OS** is an open source OS, allowing developers to add functionality to phones without having to pay for a licence. After a slow start in 2009 with less than 10% of the market, Android-based smartphones now account for 33% of all sales and have taken over from Symbian as the most widely available smartphone OS. The OS is now available on phone models from HTC, Sony Ericsson, Motorola, Samsung and LG. The Google Nexus S has the latest Android OS 2.3 (Gingerbread), while most of the other Android based phones are operating on 2.1 [Eclair] or 2.2 [Froyo].

ABOUT THE REST

For more about the smartphones that did not make our What to Buy list, check out www.choice.com.au/smartphones

HOW WE TEST

Ergonomics Our testers assess each phone's keypad, touchscreen and keyboard, as well as general handling and menu controls.

Ease of use A user panel determines how easy it is to answer a call, store a number into memory and dial a number stored in memory.

Web browser performance is scored on

how easy it is to start the browser, navigate to sites, enter addresses and use favourites and bookmarks. A practical test on content downloads is also carried out and extra points are awarded for Wi-Fi connectivity. **SMS** use is tested by writing and receiving an SMS and checking the suitability of the display for texting.

Display Our testers look at the size of the

display as well as quality of the image with regard to sharpness and colour clarity.

Sound quality For both incoming and outgoing calls, our testers carry out a number of acoustic measurements, such as frequency response. A user panel also rates the sound quality of calls.

Camera Our testers assess the phone's digital camera capabilities to produce an

		PERFORMANCE													FEATURES				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ergonomics score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Web browser score (%)	SMS score (%)	Display score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Camera score (%)	Music quality score (%)	Durability score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Sensitivity score (%)	Time in use (hrs:mins)	Standby time (days)	Inbuilt GPS receiver	Charging via USB	Wi-Fi (b and g)	LED Flash	Camera button
HTC Wildfire	72	61	66	90	61	80	63	71	71	76	82	79	8:15	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Samsung Galaxy S80	72	67	80	90	74	60	62	58	67	76	90	72	4:00	13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Apple iPhone 4 (16GB)	71	65	71	72	71	85	62	59	76	76	87	50	9:30	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia 5230	71	73	76	52	79	70	64	67	79	76	78	73	7:00	15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia C6-00	71	69	74	64	87	70	59	66	70	76	78	72	12:00	17	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LG BL40 New Chocolate	70	70	68	45	77	90	73	63	68	76	65	72	5:15	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia E72	70	46	76	48	72	86	69	64	73	76	97	70	10:30	19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Samsung Galaxy S	70	68	81	64	59	70	52	69	74	76	89	73	9:30	21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackberry Bold 9700	69	52	55	62	68	87	70	65	70	72	96	73	10:00	17	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Samsung Wave	69	64	72	58	72	75	58	63	76	72	86	71	11:05	16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sony Ericsson Vivaz	68	67	77	55	78	65	57	64	68	72	86	72	7:45	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LG GD880 Mini	67	73	72	52	80	75	65	53	67	72	59	75	5:00	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LG GT540 Optimus	67	61	73	64	79	50	63	61	63	76	83	77	8:15	15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia E52	67	57	67	61	54	92	63	67	67	40	96	76	13:30	17	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia C3-00	67	58	87	50	74	56	58	58	61	76	92	80	6:15	21	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sony Ericsson Xperia X10 mini pro	67	57	61	90	66	73	58	64	48	80	68	75	4:00	15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackberry 9520 Storm 2	66	63	54	40	73	80	67	60	73	72	76	79	5:45	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Motorola Milestone	66	59	45	66	51	80	72	62	74	72	82	75	8:00	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
HTC Desire	65	65	62	61	55	60	66	59	73	76	71	78	6:30	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Samsung Monte	65	63	71	36	68	60	67	60	73	76	83	71	7:15	23	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
HTC Legend	64	58	48	62	54	60	71	59	70	76	79	80	7:30	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia C5	64	69	67	50	51	53	61	62	63	76	90	75	8:30	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia X2-00	64	83	84	10	66	58	57	60	67	76	75	76	13:30	22	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
LG GW620	62	58	61	65	44	50	62	60	66	72	83	72	8:24	13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia 6700 slide	62	54	67	50	51	63	61	62	63	72	82	75	7:18	9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sony Ericsson Xperia X10	62	62	50	50	46	85	50	58	64	76	78	77	6:42	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Nokia 7230	60	57	83	23	57	61	67	54	60	76	63	71	5:00	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

USING THE TABLE All smartphones on test have Bluetooth stereo, audio jack support for standard headphones, flight mode and can play video. All except the Apple iPhone 4 have a micro-SD memory card slot.

Scores The overall score is made up of: Ergonomics: 10%; Ease of use: 10%; Web browser: 10%; SMS: 10%; Display: 10%; Sound quality: 10%; Camera: 10%; Music quality: 10%; Durability: 7%; Battery life: 7%.

image in different lighting situations.

The resulting photos are printed and rated for resolution, colour reproduction and noise. They also look at how easy the phone is to use in picture-taking mode.

Music quality Our testers measure the ability of the phone to perform as a music player. They test the phones with the supplied headphones as well as a set of

reference headphones. They also assess how easy it is to navigate playlists, music transfers, volume control and available memory.

Durability Our testers simulate falls from a table or out of a shirt pocket up to 25 times, as well as storing the phones in hot, damp conditions and carrying out a rain test.

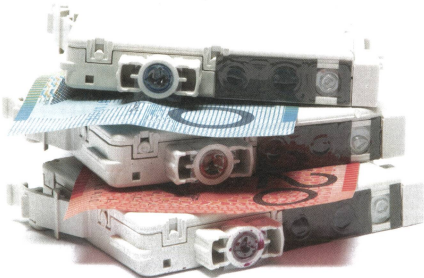
Battery life This is mainly based on the time-in-use result, but testers also consider the charging time and battery status warning.

Sensitivity They measure the phones' receiving sensitivity and sending power on both the GSM and 3G bands (particularly important in areas with poor network coverage).

SPECIFICATIONS

without removing battery	PC can see internal or removable memory as PC drive	Dedicated music player button	FM radio	Next G version available	Internal memory (MB)	Touchscreen type	QWERTY keyboard	Specific absorption rate (SAR, W/kg)	Operating system (OS)	Camera resolution (megapixels)	Weight (g)	Contact	Price (\$)
✓	✓		✓	✓	384	Capacitive	Virtual	0.98	Android 2.1	5	118	htc.com/au	480
✓			✓	✓	170	Capacitive	Virtual	0.85	Android 2.1	3.2	110	samsung.com.au	329
	✓			✓	16000	Capacitive	Virtual	0.93	iPhone OS 4	5	141	apple.com.au	859
✓			✓	✓	70	Resistive	Virtual	1.10	Symbian 5th edition	2	114	nokia.com.au	245
✓			✓	✓	240	na	Physical	1.03	Symbian 60 5th edition	5	154	nokia.com.au	405
✓			✓	(A)	1100	Capacitive	Virtual	0.757	Individual	5	131	lge.com/au	589
✓			✓	✓	250	na	Physical	1.31	Symbian 3rd edition	5	129	nokia.com.au	495
			✓	✓	8000	Capacitive	Virtual	0.238	Android 2.1	5	117	samsung.com.au	850
✓			✓	✓	256	na	Physical	1.18	Individual	3	119	au.blackberry.com	799
✓			✓	✓	2000	Capacitive	Virtual	0.988	Bada 1.0	5	117	samsung.com.au	519
✓	✓		✓	✓	75	Resistive	Virtual	1.04	Symbian 5th edition	8.1	97	sonyericsson.com.au	799
✓			✓	(A)	50	Capacitive	Virtual	1.23	Individual	5	103	lge.com/au	389
✓			✓	✓	116	Resistive	Virtual	1.23	Android 2.1	3	118	lge.com/au	199
✓			✓	✓	na	na	na	1.24	Symbian	3.2	94	nokia.com.au	449
✓			✓	(B)	55	na	Physical	1.18	Symbian Series 40	2	112	nokia.com.au	188
✓	✓		✓	✓	128	Capacitive	Physical	1.55	Android 2.1	5	119	sonyericsson.com.au	499
✓				✓	2000	Capacitive	Virtual	1.02	Individual	3.2	159	au.blackberry.com	599
✓				✓	133	Capacitive	Physical	0.64	Android 2.0	5	170	motorola.com.au	689
✓			✓	✓	576	Capacitive	Virtual	0.752	Android 2.1	5	137	htc.com/au	768
✓			✓	(A)	230	Capacitive	Virtual	1.02	Individual	3.2	94	samsung.com.au	129
✓			✓	✓	384	Capacitive	Virtual	0.565	Android 2.2	5	126	htc.com/au	599
✓				✓	50	na	na	1.34	Symbian 3rd edition	3.2	90	nokia.com.au	246
✓	✓		✓	(B)	66	na	na	0.82	Symbian Series 40	5	81	nokia.com.au	135
✓			✓	(A)	166	Resistive	Physical	0.819	Android 1.5	5	140	lge.com/au	299
✓				(A)	50	na	na	0.91	Symbian 3rd edition	5	106	nokia.com.au	287
✓			✓	✓	1000	Capacitive	Virtual	1.25	Android 2.1	8.1	138	sonyericsson.com.au	899
✓			✓	✓	45	na	na	0.97	Individual	3.2	103	nokia.com.au	183

itivity: 6%. **Features and system** See What to Look For, page 50. **Price** Recommended retail, as of February 2011. **TABLE NOTES** Na not applicable. (A) NextG version not available, but models supports YesG (900MHz) network. (B) No 3G support – these models work on the GSM (2G) network only.



STORY STEVE DUNCOMBE

Don't \$ink your cash

Are less expensive printer ink alternatives as good as the manufacturers' own?

NUTSHELL

>> There are several cost-cutting alternatives to using original ink cartridges.
>> The trade-off can be in quality, durability and the time and effort required.

Inkjet printers can be cheap to buy but expensive to run due to the ongoing cost of ink replacement (see graph, opposite). But do you need to pay through the nozzle for new, original ink cartridges every time, or can you save with non-genuine ink alternatives? *CHOICE* Computer fitted five popular inkjet printer models from the top brands with refilled and non-genuine replacement ink cartridges, to see how they fared for running costs and performance (see table, below). We also looked at two alternatives – a do-it-yourself (DIY) refill kit and a continuous ink system.

Coping with non-genuine inks

No-name compatible inks may not have the quality, colour life or reliability of genuine cartridges, but results can vary markedly depending on the make and model of your printer. The Canon MX870, for example, had very good print quality and reliability across all brands of ink on test, but its replacement inks fared badly in the durability test,

with noticeable fading evident across the board. Check with the ink reseller which brand of cartridges they supply, where they come from and what warranty (if any) is offered.

Fill it yourself?

Refilling your own cartridges with a bottle of ink fluid and syringe, while fiddly and time-consuming, can save you plenty. We tried out a DIY refill kit from ink supplier Calidad for the Epson Stylus Office TX510N, and found it cut black ink per page costs to one-fifth and four-colour page costs to less than half that of an original cartridge, though overall quality wasn't on par and some fading occurred.

You should inject the ink slowly to avoid messy bubbling and leaking, and the cartridges you refill should be original and genuine – third-party compatible ones may not be built exactly the same or be refillable. You may also need to buy a "chipper" device that resets the cartridge's electronic chip, making the printer treat the refilled cartridge like a new one.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE												RUNNING COSTS																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																							
		Overall score (%)**		Quality average score (%)		Durability average score (%)		QUALITY SCORE (%)					DURABILITY SCORE (%)					COST PER BLACK PAGE																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																			
								Canon MX870	HP Officejet4500	Epson Stylus Office TX510N	Lexmark Platinum Pro905	Brother MFC-6890cdw	Canon MX870	HP Officejet4500	Epson Stylus Office TX510N	Lexmark Platinum Pro905	Brother MFC-6890cdw	Canon MX870	HP Officejet4500	Epson Stylus Office TX510N	Lexmark Platinum Pro905																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																
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TABLE & GRAPH NOTES * Ink costs over three years are calculated based on a typical use scenario of five mono and one photo A4 pages output per day, five days a week over 52 weeks a year for three years. **Overall score is comprised of the quality average (70%) and durability average (30%) scores. na Not applicable. (A) Note that the gaps in the table are because some ink suppliers may sell several different brands of ink for any designated printer model, including unbranded compatibles. Not all suppliers



HOW WE TEST

Performance Using new standard capacity cartridges, we print test pages until the ink runs out, both for black only and colour pages. The number of pages is recorded and all cartridges weighed before and after printing, and the amount of ink use calculated. Standard text pages are A4 with 5% black ink coverage; colour pages have 100% coverage, using 25% of each

colour (cyan, magenta, yellow and black). Head cleans are performed as necessary.

Quality A full-colour print on A4 glossy photo paper (matched to each printer brand) is used for quality assessment and compared with a print produced with original inks. The quality assessment includes colour balance, skin tones, darkness and contrast.

Durability Using smaller, 10cm x 15cm samples, we expose half of a print to high-intensity unfiltered halogen light (including UV and infrared) for three weeks to simulate much longer exposure in normal lighting conditions, then compare the two halves of each image. The results indicate quite clearly that brands of non-genuine inks vary greatly in their durability.

DID YOU KNOW?

Canon was found to be the brand of printer that owners were most likely to buy again in our recent survey of close to 3300 CHOICE Computer members. To find out more, see CHOICE, February 2011, page 13, or for the full story see CHOICE Computer, November/December 2010. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 or log on to www.choice.com.au/magazines

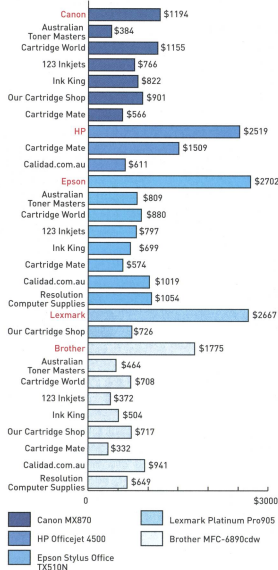
Continuous ink supply systems (CISS)

A CISS replaces original with modified cartridges that link via flexible tubes to a far larger reservoir of ink, which can be topped up at any time. They're available for most printer models, and though initially expensive can produce significant cost savings in a short time. We bought and fitted a Rihac CISS to the Brother MFC-6890cdw. The initial setup was fiddly and took numerous head cleans, but the end result was an excellent colour match to the original ink sample, with only some very fine lines apparent. As with the DIY kit, however, we found significant print fading in our durability testing.

CHOICE VERDICT

You can certainly save by switching to non-genuine inks, but the key is to find the best replacement inks for your particular printer, not necessarily the least expensive. ■

INK COSTS OVER THREE YEARS*



COST PER FULL-COLOUR PAGE

Printer Model	HP Officejet 4500	Epson Stylus Office TX510N	Lexmark Platinum Pro905	Brother MFC-6890cdw	Contact
Canon MX870	\$1.05	\$1.97	\$2.42	\$2.60	\$1.80
40c		94c		74c	74c
92c			78c	81c	81c
86c		72c		59c	59c
\$1.18		92c		80c	80c
70c		84c		43c	43c
	54c	\$1.09		96c	96c
				rihac.com.au	rihac.com.au
53c	81c	59c		39c	39c

only ink for all models tested. (B) Rihac CISS cost per page not determined. This ink system was not printed until empty due to the large size of the tanks. Not tested due to lack of sufficient available alternative inks.

STORY CHRIS RUGGLES

Make 'em snappy

CHOICE has some new compact cameras to recommend.

The digital camera market moves very quickly. To keep up, CHOICE has already tested 27

new compact cameras since our last test (see CHOICE, December 2010/January 2011, page 58).

The five cameras recommended here complete our What to Buy list. They join the Nikon Coolpix L110 (\$399), Coolpix S8000 (\$499) and Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ8 (\$499) from our December/January What to Buy list, all of which scored 71%. The complete table for those cameras can be found in that issue.

To get detailed information for the digital cameras here, including how we test, what to look for and the full table, check out www.choice.com.au/digitalcameras. ■



75% Nikon Coolpix P100

PRICE \$519

This is a very versatile camera with a very long (26mm-678mm) zoom. It starts up quickly and is one of the few on test with a viewfinder, but this can leak light when viewing outdoors and lacks brightness and contrast in poor light.

Its viewing screen is a bit bright and lacks contrast in playback mode, but can be tilted vertically. Video quality is good, but its audio has scratching and humming noises when zooming in video mode. It also has some colour aberrations and a loss of resolution in both wide and tele modes, tends to overexpose in bright outdoor conditions and its image stabilisation isn't very effective.



74% Canon PowerShot SX30 IS

PRICE \$649

Also very versatile, with a very long (24mm-840mm) zoom, this PowerShot starts up quickly and is one of the few on test with a viewfinder, but this is unsteady and colours can separate when panning. Its viewing screen can be tilted in vertical and horizontal directions, and the built-in HDMI connection can simplify viewing images on a TV.

Video quality is good, but outdoor still pictures tend to be a little overexposed. There are also some colour aberrations in both wide and tele modes. Images are noisy (with unwanted coloured dots) at ISO1600. Its autofocus tends to be slow and lacks stability in low light conditions. Image stabilisation performance is comparatively poor.



70% Canon Ixus 300 HS

PRICE \$499

The Ixus 300 HS is a small and light camera suitable for pocket or purse, with good overall image quality for both stills and movies. Its zoom is limited (28mm-105mm) and it has noticeable colour aberrations in wide mode, with some reduction in sharpness in low light conditions. It also has a relatively slow shutter response, but you can compensate for this by pressing the shutter button halfway while framing a shot.



BEST BUY

70% Canon PowerShot SX130 IS

PRICE \$329

A versatile camera with a long (28mm-336mm) zoom, this PowerShot uses normal or rechargeable AA batteries, which is uncommon these days and can be handy when travelling.

Overall image quality is good for both stills and movies, but it has some colour aberrations in wide mode and video images are noisy in low light conditions. Its viewing screen lacks resolution and has a blue tint and visible pixel structure in playback mode.



70% Panasonic Lumix DMC-FX700

PRICE \$599

A small and light camera, this Lumix is suitable for pocket or purse with good overall image quality for both stills and movies. Its zoom is limited (24mm-120mm), but starting at 24mm makes it useful indoors and for wide angle shots.

Resolution is reduced in tele mode and pictures taken indoors without flash tend to be noisy. There are some reflections in the viewing screen and contrast is reduced in bright conditions. It also lacks sharpness and is slightly yellow in poor lighting conditions.



STORY CHRIS BARNES

Mop or flop?

A good steam mop will clean hard floors well, but some are little better than an ordinary mop and bucket.

NUTSHELL

>> On test: 12 steam mops – nine stick and three canister models – ranging in price from \$99 to \$429.

Steam mops claim to make cleaning grimy floors (and other surfaces) easy and chemical free, using the power of steam to shift stubborn dirt. Some claim the steam also kills bacteria and mites. They're suitable for most hard floors, including vinyl, tiles and sealed timber, but are they really so much better than an ordinary mop and bucket?

Like vacuum cleaners, steam mops come in stick and canister forms, but they don't have suction power. If you need to clean up large amounts of spilt liquids, you'll need a conventional mop or a wet-and-dry vacuum cleaner instead.

The four steam mops CHOICE recommends (see page 58) are much more effective than an ordinary hand mop (when using plain hot water), though they're much more expensive, too. If you have lots of hard floors and other surfaces to clean and want to avoid using cleaning chemicals, these may be just what you need. However, two models on test are no better at cleaning than an ordinary mop (see below). >

ABOUT THE REST

The **Wertheim** and **Optim** heat up very quickly and can be refilled without waiting for the unit to cool down.

Of the **Kenwood** steam mops, the **Floor Sweeper Steam Mop SC7000** is easy to use, heats up very quickly and can be refilled without waiting for the unit to cool down, but its floor sweeper is slow to pick up sand from a hard floor. The **Steam Mop 2000 SC2000** leaves a lot of water on the floor, while the **SC590** is the worst mop on test. It leaves a fair amount of water behind, its steam control button is difficult and tiring to use and the bristles on its nylon brush attachment flatten quickly.

The **Pullman** is easy to use and the iron attachment for clothes produces a good amount of steam, but the cleaner takes more than 12 minutes to heat up and the bristles on its nylon brush attachment flatten quickly. Like the SC590, it's no more effective than an ordinary mop and bucket.

The **Danox** is quick to heat up but the mop head doesn't move smoothly over the floor.

WHAT TO BUY

Bissell Steam Mop Max 65A8-F	\$249
Hoover ProSteam	\$149
Monster 60 Plus SC60	\$399
Bissell Steam Mop 90T1-F	\$199

USING A STEAM MOP

- **Steam mops can be used on most hard floors – ceramic tiles, vinyl, linoleum, marble, stone and sealed timber, as well as on carpet and upholstery – if they have a suitable attachment.** They shouldn't be used on cork tiles or unsealed/waxed timber, as they can damage these surfaces. Always test first in an inconspicuous spot to make sure they won't harm the floor material.
- **If the mop is on, don't leave it in one place for too long,** as the build-up of heat and steam can damage the floor. It's usually OK to do this sparingly to clean particularly grubby spots, but be careful.
- **Models with steam guns, brush attachments or jet nozzles can also be useful for cleaning dirt, mould and scum from tile grout or other vertical surfaces such as glass shower screens,** although we found when cleaning a shower cubicle that the amount of steam that builds up can make the job rather uncomfortable. (Turning on the bathroom fan will help minimise this.) The best canister performer for cleaning bathrooms is the **Monster 60 Plus SC60**; it's good at cleaning soap scum from glass and removing mould from tile grout. The other two canister models, the **Pullman** and **Kenwood Multy Steam Cleaner SC590**, are good at cleaning glass, but the nylon bristles on their brush attachments flatten quickly and they aren't as effective at cleaning grout.



**CHOICE
ONLINE**

For information on steam sterilising, plus attachment lists for the steam mops on test, log on www.choice.com.au/steammops

WHAT TO BUY

77% Bissell Steam Mop Max 65A8-F

PRICE \$249

GOOD POINTS

- Best cleaning performance on test.
- Easy to use.
- Removable water container is very easy to fill.
- No need to wait for it to cool down to fill the container with water.
- Heats up very quickly.

BAD POINTS

- Leaves a fair amount of water on the floor after cleaning.



77% Hoover ProSteam

PRICE \$149

GOOD POINTS

- Good cleaning performance.
- Easy to use.
- Telescopic wand.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.



BEST BUY

73% Monster 60 Plus SC60

PRICE \$399

GOOD POINTS

- Good cleaning performance.
- Very easy to use.
- Removes mould from tiles well.
- Good quality bristles on the nylon brush.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.



PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE		FEATURES									SPECIFICATIONS				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Carpet attachment	Telescopic wand	Removable water tank	Hand-held tool	Refill while cleaning	Steam-ready indicator	Steam on-lock switch	Steam off-lock switch	Water low indicator	Type	Weight (kg)	Reach (m, including cord)	Measured wattage (W)
Bissell Steam Mop Max 65A8-F	77	80	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			Clear tank	Stick	3.2	5.6	1300
Hoover ProSteam	77	78	75	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	Stick	2.6	7.6	710
Monster 60 Plus SC60	73	70	80	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		Canister	4.2	6.4	1300
Bissell Steam Mop 90T1-F	72	73	70		✓	✓		✓	✓			Clear tank	Stick	3.2	5.8	1300
Wertheim Steam Mop SM1000	65	63	68	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				Stick	3.2	7.0	1100
Kenwood Floor Sweeper Steam Mop SC7000	64	60	74		✓			✓	✓			Clear tank	Stick	3.6	5.6	1100
Kenwood Steam Mop 2000 SC2000	64	63	67		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Stick	2.7	8.0	730
Monster Steam Booster EZ1	64	63	65	✓	✓			✓	✓ (A)	✓	✓ (A)		Stick	2.8	6.6	1000
Pullman Steam Works SC388L	64	58	78			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		Canister	6.1	10.5	1300
Optim Steam Clean	62	60	65	✓				✓					Stick	1.7	5.2	1200
Danoz H2O Mop Ultra EP2120	59	63	50		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		Clear tank	Stick	3.8	8.0	1400
Kenwood Multy Steam Cleaner SC590	52	53	50			✓					✓		Canister	4	8.0	1200

USING THE TABLE SCORES The overall score is made up of: Performance: 70%; Ease of use: 30%. **Performance** is based on how effectively the mop removes each stain. **Ease of use** is made up of: ease of moving the mop head over the floor (50%), using the controls (20%), how wet it leaves the floor (20%) and ease of filling the water tank (10%). **Features and specifications** See What to Look For, opposite. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2010.

72% Bissell Steam Mop 90T1-F

PRICE \$199

GOOD POINTS

- Good cleaning performance.
- Easy to use.
- Removable water container is very easy to fill.
- No need to wait for it to cool down to fill the container with water.
- Heats up very quickly.

BAD POINTS

- Leaves a fair amount of water on the floor after cleaning.



HOW WE TEST

Performance Our tester, Peter Horvath, applies six different household substances – mustard, coffee, red wine, soy sauce, tomato sauce and black shoe polish – to vinyl floor tiles in a set pattern. The tiles are dried overnight, and any easily removable residue is wiped off by hand using a sponge and water. This leaves hard, dried residue, which he then tackles with the steam mops.

After cleaning the tiles as much as possible with each mop, Peter assesses how much visible matter or staining is left and scores the results. Shoe polish was the hardest to shift, with no mop completely removing this. The ones that did best were the Bissell Steam Mop Max 65A8-F, the Hoover and the Monster Steam Booster EZ1. Mustard also proved hard to shift for many mops; the best performers were the Bissell Steam Mop Max 65A8-F, Danoz, Hoover, Kenwood SC2000 and SC7000. Coffee and red wine were comparatively easy to remove,

with all mops cleaning these effectively. All models completely cleaned the tomato sauce and soy sauce from the vinyl floor, so these results were excluded from the total performance score. For comparison, a hand mop was also included in the performance tests (using only hot water – no cleaning chemicals), and scored 58% (equal second-worst in the test).

Where models have other functions or tools, such as for cleaning tile grouting, Peter tests these, too. He tested the three canister models with their additional tools (jet tool, nylon brush etc.) and found they produce a lot of steam while cleaning enclosed areas such as shower cubicles. Without adequate ventilation, this can make the surrounding environment unpleasant.

Ease of use Peter assesses each model for ease of moving the mop head over the floor, using the controls, how much water is left behind and ease of filling the water tank.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Water tank that can be refilled while cleaning without first needing to turn it off and let it cool down.

Cleaning pads are usually made of microfibre to trap and carry away the shifted dirt. Some come with more than one pad (sometimes of different types), which is handy for swapping over during a long cleaning job or if one's in the wash when you want to use the mop.

Carpet glider This is handy for refreshing carpet and removing light soiling, but for heavy soiling or stains you'll need a heavy-duty steam cleaner (or carpet shampoo).

Pad rest for sitting the mop on during a cleaning job (if you take a quick break to answer the phone, for instance), so it can sit in one place for a

while without damaging the floor. The Wertheim's automatically shuts off steam when the handle is released.

Telescopic wand lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you don't have to bend too much.

Power cord should be long enough that you have good reach from the power point.

Accessory tools such as a jet nozzle or brush can be useful for cleaning grout, shower cubicles and other areas.

Steam-ready indicator tells you when the steam generator has heated up and is ready to run.

Steam on-lock switch activates continuous steam flow so you don't have to hold down a trigger or button to keep the steam coming.

Steam off-lock switch is a safety feature – like a safety catch – that helps prevent accidentally turning on the steam flow.



	Time in use (min) *	Contact	Price (\$)
0	14	bissell.com.au	249
0	18	hooverfloorcare.com.au	149
0	32	euroflex.com.au	399
0	13	bissell.com.au	199
0	33	godfreys.com.au	199
5	20	kenwood-australia.com	299
0	19	kenwood-australia.com	139
0	18	euroflex.com.au	249
30	45	godfreys.com.au	429
0	18	godfreys.com.au	99
5	19	danozdirect.com.au	250
0	15	kenwood-australia.com	179

BLE NOTES * Running time until water tank is empty. (A) Locks automatically when handle is tilted back, and off when handle is returned upright position.



STORY MATTHEW STEEN

The condensed version

Given their long cycle times, are alternatives to the vented dryer worth their wait?

NUTSHELL

>> Six new dryers on test – one electric vented and five basic condenser dryers, which we haven't tested for some time.

>> The condenser dryers come with generally longer cycle times and higher running costs, so we can't recommend them based only on this test.

In response to member requests, CHOICE has included five condenser dryers in our latest round of testing, along with one electric vented dryer. Condenser dryers make up a small percentage of the market in Australia; only about 11% of respondents in our latest reliability survey (see page 14) reported owning one.

Where electric vented dryers push moist air into the surrounding area – requiring ducting to vent the air away from where the dryer is located – in condenser dryers, the water removed from clothing is pumped into a storage tank or can be plumbed into a drainage pipe. Setting up the ducting option for a vented dryer can be difficult if you live in a unit, and your laundry may not be conveniently located for venting. In this case, a condenser unit can be a more practical alternative.

Our testing found the running times of most condenser dryers exceed other types – in one case, the cycle is more than four hours long. Although the initial purchase price is quite high, heat-pump condenser dryers are far more efficient and have much lower running costs. Condenser dryer running costs over 10 years are more than for all other types of dryers, and most cost more to buy than electric vented models.

How do condenser dryers work?

As with all dryers, air is heated and pushed through the clothing in a condenser dryer to evaporate moisture. While an electric vented dryer pushes the moist hot air straight out, in a condenser, heat exchange is used to cool the air. This extracts the water vapour from the air, which then goes back into the drum to collect more water vapour and continue the cycle. The extracted water is collected in a reservoir to be manually removed, or drains away if the dryer is

plumbed in. Because of the way the heat exchanges, the air vented into the surrounds is hotter than the ambient temperature but is no longer moist. Heat pump condenser dryers use a technology that does not vent heated air, but were the most expensive on test. >

WHAT TO BUY

Our recommended list includes models in each size bracket and type, and of these, Best Buys are the least expensive to buy and run. We've nominated a Rinnai gas dryer as our Green Buy, since it's the best option for reducing carbon dioxide emissions. The Rinnai is comparatively cheap to run, but expensive to buy and install. An energy-efficient electric dryer connected to 100% green power, such as solar, is another green option.

LESS THAN 5KG – ELECTRIC VENTED

Simpson 39P400M  \$429

5KG-7KG – ELECTRIC VENTED

Ariston AS600VX  \$799

Simpson 39S600M  \$619

Simpson 39S500M  \$559

6KG-7KG – HEAT PUMP CONDENSERS

Bosch EcoLogixx 7 WTW86560AU/06 \$2899

Miele Softronic Eco-Comfort T 8627WP \$3199

GAS

Rinnai Dry-Soft 6  \$1599

THE SUN / NATURAL CONVECTION

A clothes line / rack  \$50

BEST BUYS

LESS THAN 5KG –
ELECTRIC VENTED DRYERS

71% Simpson
39P400M

PRICE \$429

CAPACITY 4kg

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent ease of use.
- Can be wall mounted or stacked.

BAD POINTS

- No drying rack supplied.

5KG-7KG –
ELECTRIC VENTED DRYERS

73% Simpson
39S600M

PRICE \$619

CAPACITY 6kg

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent ease of use.
- Can be wall mounted or stacked.

BAD POINTS

- No drying rack supplied.



72% Simpson
39S500M

PRICE \$559

CAPACITY 5kg

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent ease of use.
- Can be wall mounted or stacked.

BAD POINTS

- No drying rack supplied.

ABOUT
THE REST

>> The Electrolux EDV605 is a good electric vented dryer overall, however it has a comparatively long cycle time.
>> All the condenser dryers are OK overall, but they are let down by their energy efficiency and drying time.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Controls – autosensing vs timer

Some dryers have a timer that is set manually, while others have a sensor that detects when a load has reached a preset dryness level and automatically switches off. (Some have both.) It's easier to overshoot the drying level with timer dryers and waste energy, so aim for less time and check the clothes periodically to avoid this as well as potential damage to the clothes.

Filters collect fluff quickly and need regular cleaning, so it's helpful if the filter is at the front. While most are on or near the door, the Rinnai's filter is located at the rear of the drum and so is hard to reach to remove and replace if the dryer is floor-mounted or mounted too high.

Vents / ducting Moist, hot air from the dryer must be able to escape your laundry to prevent dripping walls and mouldy ceilings. If you

have an exhaust fan or can put your dryer near a window, you may not need to worry about this; if not, you're likely to need a venting kit. Some dryers come with one, while for others it's an optional extra. However, not all ducting kits suit all situations. Discuss installation with the sales staff to make sure you get what you need. Some dryers that have a vent at the front to exhaust the air cannot be ducted, making an exhaust fan or window more important. The table on page 62 shows which dryers are front-vented and whether they can be ducted.

Wall-mountable or stackable

Mounting a dryer on the wall or stacking it on top of a front-loader washing machine saves space.

Reverse tumbling The drum reverses the direction of tumbling at regular intervals to minimise tangling and dry clothes evenly.

A drying rack can be mounted inside some models to hold items you don't want to tumble, such as gym shoes or delicates. Some can be attached to the front of the vent.

Drainage Condenser dryers either have a reservoir or can be plumbed to a drainage pipe. All the condenser dryers on test have both options, but we recommend plumbing condenser dryers, as the reservoir stops the dryer when full – not useful if you aren't around to empty it and start the machine again.



ACCESSIBILITY

CHOICE assessed the newly tested dryers for people with disabilities using Independent Living Centre NSW guidelines.

- **For those with cognitive impairment** All except the Electrolux EDV605 can run a two-step process if dial is left on a preselected program, but dryers should be turned off at the wall when not in use.

- **For wheelchair users or people with back pain** The Asko T753C is very easy to open and close.
- **For people with upper limb dysfunction or weakness** The Electrolux EDC47130W is recommended.
- **For those with vision impairment** The Electrolux EDV605 is recommended.



THE CASE OF THE IMPOSTOR DRYER

We wanted to include the condenser dryer manufactured by Fisher & Paykel in this test. However, when we ordered a sample from a local retailer, we received the wrong product, which was delivered in the right packaging. Believing this to be a one-off mistake, we

returned it and asked for another – and the same thing happened again. The dryer supplied was half the price of the dryer we ordered, so if you do purchase a Fisher & Paykel condenser dryer, don't rely on the external packing to tell you what it is – open it up and double-check.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES			
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Drying time score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cycle time (mins)	Noise (dB)	Energy used per load (kWh)	Controls	Reverse tumbling	Drying rack	Wall-mountable / stackable
LESS THAN 5KG – ELECTRIC VENTED DRYERS											
Simpson 39P400M	71	63	67	93	103	54	3.39	Timer	✓		✓ / ✓
Fisher & Paykel DE45F56AW1	68	62	62	93	135	58	3.92	Timer	✓	Optional	✓ / -
Fisher & Paykel DE35F56AW1	66	61	62	82	106	58	3.11	Timer	✓		✓ / -
Fisher & Paykel DE45F56EW1	66	58	60	92	145	58	4.17	Sensor & timer	✓	Supplied	✓ / -
5KG-7KG – ELECTRIC VENTED DRYERS											
Ariston AS600VX	73	66	72	88	128	55	4.79	Sensor & timer	✓		✓ / -
Simpson 39S600M	73	66	70	93	139	57	4.75	Timer	✓		✓ / ✓
Simpson 39S500M	72	64	69	93	122	54	4.11	Timer	✓		✓ / ✓
Bosch WTV74100AU/08	71	66	69	87	169	54	5.57	Sensor & timer			- / ✓
# Electrolux EDV605	67	60	64	85	174	57	5.40	Sensor & timer	✓		✓ / ✓
Fisher & Paykel DE60F60EW1	67	59	63	93	192	57	5.47	Sensor & timer	✓		- / ✓
Whirlpool AWD60A (A)	67	61	61	92	189	52	5.28	Timer		Supplied	✓ / -
6KG-8KG – CONDENSER DRYERS											
# Bosch WTE84101AU	68	62	66	85	187	56	6.04	Sensor & timer			- / ✓
# Asko T753C	67	61	64	87	171	56	5.28	Sensor & timer			- / ✓
# LG TD-C809E	67	62	61	87	247	55	6.95	Sensor & timer	✓	Supplied	- / ✓
# Haier HDY-C70	64	57	59	87	231	58	6.64	Sensor & timer			- / ✓
# Electrolux EDC47130W	63	56	60	82	226	57	6.75	Sensor & timer	✓		- / ✓
6KG-7KG – HEAT PUMP CONDENSER DRYERS											
Bosch WTW86560AU/06 (B)	80	90	68	85	161	51	2.40	Sensor & timer			- / ✓
Miele T8627WP	80	86	70	90	142	50	2.58	Sensor & timer	✓	Optional	- / ✓
Electrolux EDH97950W	73	81	66	73	187	56	3.60	Sensor & timer	✓		- / ✓
GAS DRYERS											
Rinnai Dry-Soft 6	71	53	80	88	88	59	6.15	Sensor & timer			✓ / ✓

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Energy efficiency: 40%; Drying time: 40%; Ease of use: 20%. The energy efficiency score takes into account only the energy used at the point of connection in your home; if production of energy were included, the gas dryers would score significantly higher. **Features** See What to Look For, page 61. **Running costs** This is based on drying a full load about three times a

HOW WE TEST

Energy efficiency Our tester, Mohamed Jawahir (pictured, right), puts a standard wet load of washing into the dryer (size dependent on its capacity) and measures how long it takes to dry and the amount of energy used. The energy efficiency and drying time scores are based on the amount of energy and time used per kilogram of clothing.

Drying time Mohamed uses a sensor to determine when the clothes are dry and automatically turns off if the dryer has one; otherwise, he tests using the timer.

Ease of use is assessed according to how easy the controls are to use and how accessible the filter is to clean and replace.



					SPECIFICATIONS			COSTS	
Programs	Air vent location	Ducting kit	Filter location	Unit starts when door shuts	Capacity (kg)	Dimensions (cm, W x H x D)	Contact	Running costs (\$/10 years)	Price (\$)
Normal, hot	Front (rear optional)	Optional	Inside front		4	60 x 80 x 51	simpson.com.au	1017	429
Normal, synthetics / delicates	Rear	Optional	Inside front	✓	4.5	57 x 81 x 56	fp.com.au	1176	499
Normal, synthetics / delicates	Front	na	Door	✓	3.5	57 x 81 x 44	fp.com.au	933	369
Normal, low, regular	Rear	Optional	Inside front		4.5	57 x 81 x 56	fp.com.au	1251	529
Automatic, easy iron, cool tumble	Rear	Supplied	Inside front		6	60 x 83 x 56	aristonchannel.com	1437	799
Normal, hot	Front or rear	Optional	Inside front		6	61 x 80 x 62	simpson.com.au	1425	619
Normal, hot	Front (rear optional)	Optional	Inside front		5	60 x 80 x 55	simpson.com.au	1233	559
Normal, very dry, cupboard dry, iron dry, warm, cold	Rear or left side	Supplied	Inside front		7	60 x 85 x 60	bosch.com.au	1671	1049
Normal, delicates, airing	Front or rear	Optional	Inside front		6	60 x 80 x 60	electrolux.com.au	1621	669
Normal, dry, delicates, ready to wear, ready to iron, then up	Rear	Supplied	Inside front		6	60 x 85 x 57	fp.com.au	1641	669
Normal, dry, normal, airing	Front door	na	Door		6	60 x 83 x 56	whirlpool.com.au	1584	599
Normal, low	Rear	na	Inside front		7	60 x 85 x 60	bosch.com.au	1811	1699
Normal, low, delay start, low temperature, increase, time saver, remaining time display	Front	na	Door		6	60 x 83 x 56	asko.com.au	1585	1599
Normal, light, standard, very dry, extra dry	Rear	na	Inside front		8	60 x 85 x 64	lge.com.au	2085	1839
Normal, synthetics	Rear	na	Inside front		7	60 x 85 x 62	haierlife.com.au	1991	899
Normal, delicates, synthetics	Front panel	na	On door		7	60 x 85 x 60	electrolux.com.au	2024	949
Normal, very dry, cupboard dry, iron dry, warm, cold	Rear	na	Inside front		6.5	60 x 85 x 60	bosch.com.au	720	2899
Normal, warm air, cold air, low temperature	Rear	na	Door		6	60 x 85 x 58	miele.com.au	774	3199
Normal, strong, cupboard, damp, iron, cooling	Front	na	Inside front		7	60 x 85 x 58	electrolux.com.au	1080	2429
Normal, extra soft, thick, delicate	Top panel	Supplied	Inside rear		6	65 x 69 x 53	rinnai.com.au	731	1599

7 years and is calculated based on electricity at 20c/kWh and gas at 1.6588c/MJ (equivalent to 6c/kWh). Price Recommended retail, as of January 2011.

LE NOTES # Newly tested model. na Not available. (A) Discontinued, but may still be available in stores. (B) Will be replaced by the Bosch WTW86561AU, facelift only.



STORY CHRIS RUGGLES

Channelling digital TV

An HD set-top box is the inexpensive way to upgrade to digital TV.

NUTSHELL

>> Most STBs on test are OK or better for digital tuner performance.
>> Some can record to a USB device, but don't do this well.

The switchover to digital TV is under way across the country (see Did You Know?, opposite) and as the analog signal is gradually switched off forever, consumers need to decide whether to buy a TV with a digital tuner or opt for a considerably less expensive set-top box (STB).

All STBs on test can display all the free-to-air channels available, including the high-definition (HD) ones. However, should you connect one to an analog TV, you'll most likely have to deal with a letterbox effect – black bars at the top and bottom of the screen – because most digital broadcasts are in 16:9 format, whereas analog TVs are 4:3. Also, while you'll be able

to watch HD programs, most analog TVs can't reproduce the detail in an HD picture, so you'll be watching them in standard definition.

USB extra

Of the STBs on test, the Olin, TEAC and Strong are also capable of recording to a USB device, which may be handy if you occasionally want to record a program. We put them through our DVR tests and found none is easy to use in this mode, nor do they have all the functions you'd expect in a DVR. We don't recommend any of them as an alternative to a DVR, and the scores for this function are not included in the overall score. ■

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE					FEATURES					
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Digital tuner performance score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Standby energy consumption (W)	USB (front / rear)	Component RCA video output	S-video output	Digital audio output – Coaxial RCA	Digital audio output – TOSLINK	Other media playback from USB device
Arista DVB-HD720	73	69	70	100	0.30	0/0	✓			✓	
NextWave THD1690	72	68	70	100	0.34	0/0	✓			✓	
Olin HVBTR-1200	71	61	76	100	0.37	0/1	✓		✓		✓
Wintal STB10HD	68	64	64	100	0.32	0/1	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Phoenix JT8000HD	68	61	70	100	0.57	0/0	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Digital+ HD3000	67	65	61	100	0.47	0/0	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grundig GSTB4101FVE	67	65	61	100	0.34	1/0	✓		✓		
TEAC HDB849	67	61	65	100	0.52	0/1	✓		✓		✓
Toppro TP-1000	67	66	60	100	0.51	0/0	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bush DFTA16HD	64	55	66	100	0.73	0/1	✓		✓		✓
Strong SRT5423	64	58	63	100	0.76	0/1	✓		✓	✓	✓
Sanyo TUHD1000	63	63	54	100	0.85	0/0	✓	✓	✓	✓	

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: Ease of use: 50%; Digital tuner performance: 40%; Standby energy consumption: 10%. **Annual energy cost** is calculated on five hours use and 19 hours in standby each day for 365 days at 20c per kWh. **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2010.



**CHOICE
ONLINE**

To find out more about the models that didn't make our recommended list, as well how we test STBs, log on to www.choice.com.au/STBextra

WHAT TO BUY



73% Arista

DVB-HD720

PRICE \$95

GOOD POINTS

- Best ease of use score.
- Good digital tuner performance.

BAD POINTS

- Screenshot illustrations in the user manual are too small to be of much use.



72% NextWave

THD1690

PRICE \$99

GOOD POINTS

- Second-best ease of use score.
- Good digital tuner performance.

BAD POINTS

- Screenshot illustrations in the user manual are too small to be of much use.



71% Olin

HVBTR-1200

PRICE \$99

GOOD POINTS

- Best digital tuner score.
- Has a power switch to turn it off at the rear.
- Can record to a USB device.
- Over-the-air firmware upgrades possible.

BAD POINTS

- Only STB on test not to have an on-screen guide to remote control buttons.
- Screenshot illustrations in the user manual are too small to be of much use.

SPECIFICATIONS		COSTS	
	Weight (kg)**	Contact	Annual energy cost (\$)
x 30 x 22	1.2	arista.com.au	3.30
x 22 x 18	0.8	nextwave-digital.com	3.40
x 26 x 16.5	0.9	olinstyle.com	2.90
x 29.5 x 23.5	1.4	wintal.com.au	3.70
26 x 21	1.0	phoenixtelevision.com.au	4.90
x 26 x 20	1.1	digitplus.com.au	4.20
x 24.5 x 16	0.7	grundig.net.au	3.60
x 32 x 26	1.4	teac.com.au	3.40
28 x 21	1.1	toppro.com.au	4.30
x 16.5 x 8.5	0.2	bushaustralia.com.au	2.80
x 22 x 15.5	0.7	strong.com.au	3.40
x 26 x 22.5	1.2	sanyo.com.au	3.80
			Price (\$)
			95
			99
			99
			129
			99
			88
			169
			95
			90
			80
			99
			110

NOTE ** Rounded up to the nearest half-centimetre. ** Rounded to the nearest 100.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

On-screen menus should be easy to read and logical in format. An on-screen guide to the remote control buttons allows you to easily check the functions that you use only occasionally.

Antenna pass-through allows you to connect another device to the antenna without going through the STB processor. This is handy if you want to attach an analog device such as a VCR at the same time, but will be less useful when the analog signal is turned off.

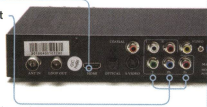
Sizes also vary considerably, so check the dimensions in the table (left).

The remote control may take the place of your TV's remote, so it's handy if it can perform basic functions such as turning the TV off or changing the volume.

Connections You can expect a variety of connections on set-top boxes, ranging from some that are common to all such as **HDMI**

and **component** (except the Bush STB on test), to less common ones such as a **USB**

for playing music or picture files or recording programs.



DID YOU KNOW?

Digital-only TV began broadcasting in Mildura / Sunraysia in June last year. By December 2013, all Australian towns and cities will have digital-only broadcasts as analog is switched off altogether. To find out when the switch is happening in your area, go to www.digitalready.gov.au

Are all your details up to date?

The winner of this month's best entry goes to B Teartle, who's no goose – or pig, or turkey for that matter. Thanks also to C Phipps, L & J Cock, B Norrie, S Clilverd, A McKenzie, J Spear and R Evans for their contributions to this month's Hard Word. If you have any examples you think should be shared with other CHOICE members, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.



Jungle Bells

BUNGLED BELLS?

A kind reader sent the Hard Word the perfect Christmas card.

getwinesdirect.com

1300 559 463



FREE FREIGHT! ANYWHERE IN AUSTRALIA! GET YOUR ORDERS IN QUICK!

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "FREIGHT" AND "DELIVERY"?
About \$7.50, apparently.

WHAT WILL THEY THINK OF NEXT?

A kitchen knife that's – wait for it – safe for food. Brilliant!



Food Safe

SANTOKU KNIFE

Food Safe

A VERY NEGATIVE MARKETING APPROACH

That ain't no way to convince us the shampoo isn't worth buying.



SOUNDS LIKE GOOD ADVICE

If you want to groom your insides, stick to fibre.

DAVINCI

POCKET COMBS

Contains two pocket-sized combs with small and large rounded teeth – ideal for the grooming of moustaches, medium and short hair.

Keep out of Reach of Children
For External Use Only

IDENTITY CRISIS

It's usually humans who make pigs of themselves at Christmas lunch – not the lunch itself ...



Delusted satin

100% polyester.
Includes Cathedral, Arabesque & Audrey satins.
Was \$19.98/m
McCall's pattern M5807. Example of use.
Range may vary by store.
No refunds.

\$0.99

Delusted satin

WARNING
This product does not safely filter fine toxic dusts or any gases or vapours. It is not suitable for protecting the wearer when spraying paint, handling asbestos or welding. It is only suitable for non toxic dusts such as fibreglass dust, saw dust, household dusts or garden dust.



The Reliable Choice

GARDENERS KNEE PADS

FOR THE HADEAN GARDEN

We'd be pretty impressed by gardening knee pads that do protect against asbestos, welding and toxic gases.